

Teen And Up Audiences

Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Wild Kratts

Chris Kratt

Martin Kratt

Aviva Corcovado

Koki (Wild Kratts)

Jimmy Z (Wild Kratts)

Zach Varmitech

Original Characters

Original Villain Character - Freeform

Creature power suit malfunctions

Mind Control

Kidnapping

Hostage Situations

Mind Manipulation

Villain Chris against his will

The Tortuga Team as Family

Implied/Referenced Torture

Aftermath of Torture

Angst

Angst with a Happy Ending

Feral Chris

Basically Chris is being used as a weapon by a villain

and he is not having a good time

Temporary Amnesia

Poachers

wildlife trafficking

Animal Instincts

Dissociation

Krttcest DNI!!!!

Chris Kratt has Autism

it's honestly not important to the story at all but It is there

Panic Attacks

sensory overloads

Protective Martin Kratt

Suicidal Thoughts

but its extremely brief and immediately shot down

Chris Kratt has PTSD

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD

English Part 1 of REPROGRAMMED AU Next Work →

REPROGRAMMED

AnonymousCriticter

Summary:

The Creature Power Suits were a brilliant and powerful attribution to science. They also had the potential to be an even greater weapon. Aviva always took steps to ensure they would never fall into the wrong hands, but no one could ever have predicted this.

Or:

A new villain ends up on the Wild Kratts' radar and he's determined to harness the powers of the CPS. The fact that they are too unstable to be operated by anyone besides the two people they were designed for is a minor obstacle.

Notes:

Hello and welcome to my Reprogrammed AU! I do post art and other content about this on my tumblr @littlecrittereli if anyone is interested!

Constructive criticism is always welcomed and appreciated <3

Chapter 1 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/134145856>)

When the Tortuga team first intercepted the distress call from a Wild Kratts Kid in Africa, they never could have predicted just how dangerous this mission would prove.

A herd of elephants, that was being monitored and protected by a local wildlife conservation center, had suddenly gone missing. The girl was the daughter of one of the researchers working at the conservation, and when her worried pleas filled the screen of the main hub, the Wild Kratts team knew they had to investigate.

Immediately setting off on a course for Africa, the team prepared themselves for a new creature rescue.

“What’ve we got Koki?” Aviva asked as she began prepping her M.I.K.

“Donita’s still busy in France with her runway show, and it looks like Gourmond is still stranded in Russia where his jet broke down.” Koki typed furiously on the console, searching the database for the last-known sightings of their usual villains. “I can’t get a confirmation on Zach’s location but we should be prepared in case he’s involved somehow.”

The Kratt brothers hovered over Koki’s chair, sharing the same pondering look. Both of them had already adorned their creature power suits, ready to arrive in the new continent.

“He’s not exactly the most subtle villain; it’s strange that nobody’s spotted him,” Martin muttered.

“I think it’s also a good idea to prepare for the possibility of poachers being involved.” Chris crossed his arms, staring hard at the data relaying on Koki’s screen about the missing herd. “These elephants were tagged and being studied, it would take an organized group to hunt them without anyone noticing.”

“And what about the tracking devices in the tags?” Aviva asked as she rejoined the group in front of the monitor. “Any luck bringing them online remotely?”

“Negative,” Koki shook her head. “The tags were likely removed, but whoever’s behind this was smart enough to loop the GPS location transmission. Nobody even noticed the tags were offline until it was too late.”

“That also means their last known location isn’t much of a clue either,” Aviva sighed.

“But it’s still a place to start!” Martin smiled confidently, placing a hand on Aviva’s shoulder.

This was not the team’s first tango with wildlife trafficking, and would hardly be their last. Poaching was one of the most profitable illegal trades in the entire world, and as long as money was involved, animals would always be at risk. Most of these missions ended up involving local authorities in handling the criminals while the Tortuga team relocated the displaced wildlife. But, until evidence suggested criminal involvement, the Kratts were investigating solo.

The comm system in the turtle ship buzzed to life as the pilot announced their arrival. “Passengers are suggested to buckle their seatbelts as we make our descent to the savanna plains of Africa,” Jimmy announced, mimicking a travel pilot.

The passengers largely ignored his message with a smile, knowing their landing would be graceful enough to continue their conversation undisturbed.

“We’re landing about a half mile from the last known location of the herd,” Koki announced, opening up a map of the surrounding terrain.

“Aviva, you should meet up with the conservation rangers, and find out everything you can about the herd,” Martin began splitting their tasks. “Chris and I will start on the trail and see if we can start tracking down where they may have gone.”

Aviva nodded, already digging one of the buzz-bike helmets out of storage.

“Koki, we need you here to continue monitoring those tags, and let us know if there are any changes,” Chris concluded.

“And I’ll stay here!” Jimmy announced as he entered from the cockpit. “You know, in case you need anything teleported in an emergency.”

The group laughed as Jimmy lounged in his chair. “I’ll keep an eye on things, be safe guys!” Koki waved.

Rolling the buzz-bike from the garage, Aviva and the bros waved each other good luck before heading off in their different directions, hopeful to rescue some elephants.

In a large metal bunker, hidden in the wooden savannas, Zach Varmitech was hopeful to make a profit.

“You ensured your methods would be subtle,” his client sneered, tapping the side of his whisky glass in annoyance.

“And they were!” Zach argued. He snapped his fingers and a nearby Zachbot approached with a tablet. “The data loop I programmed into those GPS trackers gave you a whole 6 hours of transport!”

“I didn’t pay you for 6 hours, Mr. Varmitech.” A much larger man, with broad shoulders and a tight chest, sighed. He was clad in a pressed and tailored black suit, not a spec of lint or fuzz littered the surface. His knuckles were defined and clad with several golden rings adorned with jewels. The most prominent feature was the golden lion mask hiding the top portion of his face. The eyes of the mask cast shadows upon his face, but with a proper tilt to the head, sharp deep eyes made their appearance. “I paid you to make the evidence disappear, and right now I have an entire conservation’s worth of rangers on my tail. Your technology is supposed to be the most cutting-edge in the globe and currently... I’m dissatisfied.”

Another shift, showing off the defined musculature of the client had Zach gulping from his seat. “Diego, I assure you the cargo will be delivered on time and unscathed! Just allow my robots to do their job.”

Before Diego could respond, a Zachbot began beeping holding out another screen showing live footage broadcasting from another Zachbot.

“Is that... a giant turtle?”

Zach let out a shrill gasp and turned towards the screen, mortified to see the *Tortuga* in the same general area as his most recent commission. “Those Wild Rats! Where are they?!”

The feed cut again to another Zachbot, zooming in on blue and green-clad figures, trekking through the wilderness. The map icon showing the location of the footage was several miles from the herd ambush zone.

“No no no no no!” Zach ripped the tablet from the robot’s claws, smashing it in a tantrum. The Zachbot just effortlessly pulled out another tablet that viewed the same information. “This can’t be happening!”

Diego grabbed the tablet, squinting at the screen as he took in the details. Two young men, probably in their early twenties were hiking along, searching footprints and gazing around the horizon. Luckily, their eyes never caught on the Zachbot who was surely in camouflage mode. “You’re panicked over... tourists?”

“Those aren’t tourists! Those are the Wild Rats and they exist to ruin everything I do!” Zach stomped his feet and continued to pace around. “We need to abandon the project, and find a different group of stinky animals to get!”

A large hand glued Zach in his place. “You forget just whose project this is. You’re not in any position to give me orders.”

Zach froze as the snout of a gold lion inched closer to his face. The hand that gripped his shoulder began to tighten, enlisting a painful popping sound.

“Wait wait wait!” Zach began to nervously beg. “I didn’t mean it like that! I just-”

“Wait a minute.” Diego interrupted, the tablet screen catching his attention once more. “What the hell is that?”

The screen was flashing various blue and green lights, what morphed from them appeared to be two humanoid cheetahs. When they took off, the Zachbot only captured the blur of their trail.

“What? The critter power suit? Or whatever it’s called.” Zach shrugged confused.

“Rewind that!” Diego ordered the Zachbot, who complied. A short loop of the transformation and the small pause before speeding off played, Diego’s attention fully captured. “Incredible...” He muttered.

“The rat brothers? Incredible?” Zach couldn’t help but laugh. “More like, annoying.”

A growl escaped Diego’s throat before increasing his grip on Zach’s shoulder, bringing their faces closer. “That technology, what is it?!”

“T-The creature power suits!” Zach nervously stuttered out. “A-Aviva programmed them to let Martin and Chris use the abilities of any animal! But they’re defective pieces of junk!”

Diego let out a thoughtful hum, dropping Zach back down to the ground. “And you think they’re here tracking my herd?”

“It’s the only reason they wouldn’t be out frolicking with bunny rabbits or something, yeah.” The inventor dusted himself off.

A deep chuckle vibrated through the hangar, causing Zach to flinch as Diego paced back toward the lone desk. “Continue as scheduled, I want the herd here before nightfall.”

“What?! You want me to lead them right to us?”

“Precisely.” Diego relaxed back into a velvet chair. “I don’t care about the elephants anymore, Mr. Varmitech.”

“I want those creature power suits.”

“It’s a good thing we ran into Blur!” Martin whooped as he darted over to another grove of trampled shrubbery. “Makes this job twice as speedy!”

Chris sniffed the ground as he caught up. “And we can keep on their trail much easier!”

Martin’s creature pod started ringing just before he took off again, instead, he paused to answer it. A projected split screen of Aviva and Koki hung in the air.

“Hey guys! I just finished up with the conservation rangers!” Aviva announced. From the look of the moving trees above her, she was walking outside. “I’ve got all the details about the herd, from the ages of the members to every vaccine they’ve been given.”

“Perfect, Aviva!” Koki smiled. “Go ahead and transmit that to the *Tortuga* and I’ll update everyone’s creature pods. How’s it going brothers?”

“We got a scent and trust me, we’re not losing it!” Martin smiled. “Still no signs of any villains.”

“We have no clue how far they’ve gone, but it looks like they’re a good while ahead of us,” The green cheetah stared at a large elephant track in the dried mud. “I haven’t seen a single human track out here... I’m starting to think maybe the herd just got spooked?”

“That still wouldn’t explain their tags suddenly going offline. This just keeps getting weirder.” Aviva hummed as she settled onto her buzz-bike.

“Whatever the reason, we still have a herd of elephants unaccounted for!” Martin slung an arm over Chris’ shoulder, much to the younger’s annoyance. “Chris and I will find them and bring them back where they belong.”

“I’m heading back to the *Tortuga*, update me if you find anything. Adiós!” Aviva ended the call, leaving the brothers clad in spots to the wilderness.

Lightly shrugging off his brother’s arm, Chris examined the direction of the track once more. “We only have a couple more hours of daylight, let’s hurry and find the herd.”

“Race ya to the next track!” Martin blurted out before speeding off into the savanna.

“Hey! No fair!” Chris couldn’t help but laugh at his older brother’s antics before following suit.

The sun had almost finished its cycle in the sky by the time the brothers skidded to a stop behind a large rock formation. They had found themselves in the more foliage parts of the wooded savanna, and just ahead they could make out a large rusted warehouse, covered by the trees.

The trail had led them here... surely the perpetrators were inside. Giving a brief update back to the *Tortuga*, the brothers crouched down facing each other.

“We should devise a plan; scope out the area first,” Chris suggested, his cheetah tail mindlessly swatting the ground. “We still don’t know who we’re dealing with.”

“I don’t see any humans around...” Martin got up to look over the rock again. The doors remained unguarded. “Maybe they just... wandered in and got stuck?”

Chris delayed in his response, taking in the sounds of the savanna. Besides the escalating crickets, he couldn’t hear any evidence of life in the warehouse. “Something about this doesn’t feel right.”

“Relax, bro!” Martin jumped over the rock as Chris hissed in protest. “We got some elephants to bring home, and it’s getting dark!”

“Martin!” Chris raced after his impatient brother as he bounded to the doors of the warehouse.

Before Chris could stop him, Martin had rolled open the rusted metal doors, enticing a screeching sound from the metal as it scraped against each other. With the enhanced senses of the suit, Chris couldn’t help but cover his ears as they practically just alerted the entire continent to their location.

But when the doors were fully opened, the brothers were met with an empty and dark building. The little light leaking in from cracks in the roof and the open doorway was enough to convince them that the warehouse had been abandoned.

Slowly stepping inside, Martin glanced around. “Empty? But the tracks led right here.”

Chris followed more cautiously, leaving behind the safety of the open air. “Were we... too late?”

“Right on time actually.” A sinister voice commented, but with the echoing metal walls, it was impossible to locate the source.

The brothers practically jumped out of their cheetah suits when the door behind them slammed shut, leaving them in the dark void of the warehouse. Immediately pressing their backs against each other, Martin and Chris darted their eyes around, desperately waiting for their eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness. Luckily cheetahs had excellent night vision and they could already begin making out the corners of the building once more.

“Who are you?” Chris cried out, unable to recognize the voice.

“What have you done with the elephants?!” Martin added.

Instead of a response, a fist came flying from the void, meeting Martin directly on the left side of his face. The blue-clad cheetah cried out as he was knocked off his feet, throwing Chris off balance.

“Martin!” Chris had his claws extended and swiped at the humanoid figure behind him. He felt his claws connect to the figure and shred four matching lines down the front of their torso. There was little resistance in the material; it felt like flesh.

The attacker stumbled backward but before Chris could advance, two arms grabbed him from behind, attempting to immobilize him. “Hey!-”

Martin shook his head, vision still swimming and concerningly dark on his left side. He heard the hiss of his brother being apprehended and pounced right back into action. Tackling the second assailant to the ground, he too noticed the humanoid sounds they made as they hit the floor.

Their usual villains preferred to have robots do most of their dirty work. Whoever was behind this ambush had the resources to hire live help. The good part was humans were not as durable as machines, and could easily be knocked down. The bad part was Martin and Chris needed to be more reserved with their suits, as to not accidentally hurt someone beyond reason.

As Chris stumbled forward, suddenly freed from the grasp, his ears twitched as several more footsteps were running in their direction. “Martin!” He chirped out in warning.

Martin scrambled back to Chris’ side, claws out and ready. “These guys are pretty dumb for wanting to mess with cheetah powers.”

Chris let out a small laugh. Only his brother would be talking smack only 30 seconds after getting sucker-punched in the face.

As the figures came closer the brothers were able to finally get a clear look at them. A couple ordinary looking men, dressed in combat gear charged forward. The Kratts were able to make quick work of them, speeding around fists and kicks and using the darkness to their advantage to trip and shove their attackers.

Martin grabbed another approaching man, throwing him over his shoulder in a show of strength to amuse his younger brother. Chris shook his head with a fond smile and proceeded to shove one man into another, their heads making a comedic-sounding bonk when they met.

While they prepared for another assault, the cheetah pair were taken by surprise by the warehouse’s lights being turned on. They both let out a hiss, covering their sensitive eyes to the bright floodlights.

A pair of hands clapping echoed through the walls, and the brothers squinted through the lights. With the overhead bulbs now showering the warehouse in white, they could see a dozen men on the floor in various stages of consciousness. Looking up, they were able to find the source of the noise, standing on a catwalk overlooking the warehouse.

A large broad figure in a suit and a gold mask was slowly clapping as if amused. Next to the man, was a shorter lankier figure with a familiar smug grin.

“Zach?!” The cheetahs let out a surprised chirp simultaneously.

“Since when did you start using lackeys?” Chris questioned, putting his hands on his hips in a mocking stance.

Zach’s grin turned into an annoyed sneer and before he could open his mouth to return the banter, the man with the gold mask interrupted. “Absolutely marvelous... Such speed and power!”

“If you just wanted an autograph all you had to do was ask!” Martin quipped. “I don’t think we’ve met before, usually our villains introduce themselves.”

“You may call me Diego,” he let out a dark chuckle, sending a shiver of unease down the cheetah’s spines. “And frankly, I’m not really the asking type.” He snapped his fingers, making Zach jump.

“Zachbots! Immobilize!” The inventor yelled from his perch on the high platform.

Despite the brothers’ advantage with cheetah speed, even they could not predict the circle of Zachbots that suddenly uncamouflaged around them in a tight formation. Reacting quickly they both charged at the barricade of bots, ready to shred through the metal exteriors, when each droid suddenly began spraying a thick white gas that overtook their vision.

Coughing as he stumbled back, Chris suddenly found himself losing balance. Martin waved his hand in the air trying to disperse the cloud enough to see when a green figure fell in the corner of his limited vision. “Chris?!” He as well began

choking on the cloud as he turned around trying to catch sight of his brother again. He was becoming too disoriented to notice the Zachbots closing the perimeter of the circle and soon ended up on his knees as well. On the ground, Martin was finally able to make out a green figure, lying limp just ahead. He attempted to crawl towards the blurry lump but soon found himself with his face on the concrete floor.

Mind too fuzzy to even register how bad of a situation they had just fallen into, Martin only barely managed to extend his arm before the darkness wading at the edges of his vision took over.

The last thing he could remember was a pair of shiny leather derby shoes stalking closer like a hunter to collect his prey.

Chapter 2 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/134553790>)

Notes:

Woo hoo I made it to chapter 2! I actually have 10 planned chapters for this fic, and Ch 3 is already done with Ch 4 in progress. I'm going to attempt a weekly update schedule (but sometimes life does happen so I apologize if I end up not sticking to it)

Thanks again for reading! Comments are always appreciated <3

The first thing Martin was aware of was a painful stinging on the left side of his face. It throbbed like a heartbeat and felt warm, like it was swollen. He almost didn't register that he was in a seated position until he tried to roll over and found himself stuck in place.

The confusion led to a more conscious state of mind and the blue brother was acutely aware of a worried voice close to his ear.

"-tin?" Chris' voice sounded muffled like it was coming from above water. "Martin, can you hear me?"

Was he underwater? "Well, I am the swim'ng brother," he slurred out.

"Yeah, and I'm the climbing brother." Chris' sarcastic tone was more clear. "That's not really gonna help us right now."

No water? Well, Martin supposed that made sense; he couldn't exactly breathe underwater. But then why did his face hurt so much?

And suddenly it came back to him; the warehouse, the Zachbots, the fancy shoes. "Oh, SHIT!" Martin jerked upwards, making himself dizzy. His limited movement clued him in to the fact his arms were tied against his torso with a thick rope. "Chris, we're in trouble."

"Thanks," Came Chris' flat tone and the more aware state had Martin realizing Chris was directly behind him, pressed up against his back, presumably tied as well.

Martin tested the bindings, finding them too tight to get any leverage. Looking around they appeared to be in the same creepy warehouse as before, but in a smaller sectioned-off room. It was eerily empty and the singular bulb casting a blueish light on everything wasn't helping. He noticed that the left side of his peripheral was entirely dark; his eye must be swollen shut.

"Are you hurt?" Chris must have sensed his wincing.

"Nothing an ice pack wouldn't fix," Martin attempted to lighten the mood, knowing if left to his own thoughts, his younger brother would overthink the situation into the worst possible scenario. "Do you have your creature pod?"

"They took them." Chris shifted as if looking down at his empty glove compartment. Their suits had long since been deactivated back into their normal vests. "Don't know how long it's been but we've probably missed the check-in. They'll already know something's wrong."

Martin remembered their brief call to the *Tortuga* before he recklessly stormed the warehouse. Koki had their last known location. As long as they weren't moved, the rest of the team would surely come to their rescue soon. That thought gave him some relief. However, he couldn't help but cringe at the events that transpired afterward. If he had just listened to Chris for once... "Chris, I'm really sorry bro."

"Come on, it's not your fault, Martin," Chris' annoyed tone had softened.

Before Martin could argue, both of the brothers' attentions were caught by an approaching conversation from the singular door in the room.

"What do you mean 'incompatible'?" The door slammed open as the man in the golden mask sauntered in.

Zach followed closely behind him furiously typing on a tablet. "All the simulations I've run have failed. I tried to warn you, these vests are pieces of junk!"

"What about the blue one?" Diego bent over, examining the vest on Martin.

“That’s the original of the prototypes, it’s even less receptive to adaptations,” Zach explained. “Your best option is the newer green model, but by my calculations, you could only operate the suit for a couple of hours before permanently damaging every nerve in your body.”

Diego let out a frustrated yell, “Then what makes them so special that they can operate these suits?!”

The brothers couldn’t help but laugh at the villains’ cluelessness, grabbing the attention of the scheming pair.

“You can’t just up and put on a creature power suit just because you want to,” Martin snickered as if it were common knowledge.

“The suits are designed specifically for our biometrics,” Chris explained with a smile. “It’s really dangerous if you don’t have the right training.”

This answer was not satisfying to Diego, and as he turned to Zach, he growled, “Then replicate the technology! I will ensure you are paid very handsomely.”

“You think I haven’t tried that for myself?!” Zach sneered crossing his arms. “You can’t just whip up a creature power suit! These are the only ones in the world!”

The brothers couldn’t help but cast smug expressions in the direction of the villains. Aviva was probably the most brilliant scientist on the earth; she always took measures to ensure the safety of her technology. And with the way these villains were at each other’s throats, they would probably be back in the *Tortuga* before the end of this conversation.

“I thought you said you’ve modified them before,” Diego hissed, his frame was shaking in anger.

“And I have!” Zach defended. “You can hack the suits all you want, it doesn’t change the fact they were built to be used by the stupid rat brothers! I can make them change into a slug if you want to step on them easier!”

Suddenly Diego paused, casting a thoughtful gaze back at the brothers. His posture straightened, a smile overcoming his lips. The way he calmly held his hands behind his back sent a shiver of alarm down the brothers’ spines. The mood of the room had shifted entirely into a tense silence.

“From my understanding, Mr Varmitech…” Diego began. “What you’re telling me, is you are able to control the function of these suits remotely, overriding control from the operator.”

“Yeah, that’s literally what I just—” Zach paused, his eyes going wide in realization. An excited grin pulled at his cheeks. “I think I know where this is going and consider me intrigued.”

“Uhh… Martin?” Chris whispered, his voice filled with uncertainty.

Martin tried his hardest to push a comforting weight against Chris’ back. “The gang will be here soon, don’t worry.” despite his encouraging words, he began to frantically look around the room in an attempt to devise *some* sort of plan. They may not have time to wait.

“How long would it take to make these modifications?” Diego gazed upon the brothers as if they were fresh meat; a hungry look in his eyes.

“Not long, but I would need access to my lab equipment,” Zach started giggling in uncontained joy as he clutched his tablet. He finally had the upper hand for once, and it was getting to his head. “However, I would like to warn you prematurely, I’m not sure if what you have in mind will be compatible with the original model. Like I said before, It’s more resistant to modifications.”

Diego hummed thoughtfully. “I’d prefer not to risk failure.” The door opened again and several Zachbots as well as the men in combat gear poured in. “Take the green one. Departure is in 5 minutes.”

The men moved instantly towards the restrained brothers, who jumped in alarm. “Wait wait wait!” Martin cried as they began untying the restraints. He immediately began to struggle, using any leverage he could while the ropes were loose. Several men held his arms in place as they separated Chris who was fighting just as hard.

“Let me go!” Chris cried, swinging his head back and cracking one of the guard’s noses. The howl of pain reinforced the men’s aggression and they shoved the younger brother against the wall with a loud thud.

“Hey! Don’t touch him!” Martin fought the hands, actually getting some good traction against them. He knew he didn’t look like much, but the years of swimming had done wonders for his upper body strength. He didn’t like to fight often but knew he could at least hold his own. He wrestled one arm free, swinging a fist towards another guard. The punch connected in the jaw, sending him flying. With one less arm holding him back, Martin was actually gaining some hope of freedom.

The dream was quickly extinguished as several more people jumped onto the scene with tasers. A quick jolt from an electrified rod had his knees buckling and he was wrestled to the ground. If only he were still in the cheetah suit, he would at least have retractable weapons. Without any creatures around he was pitifully outnumbered and out-massed.

With several knees digging into his back, pushing him into the floor, Martin could only watch helplessly as Chris was handcuffed and dragged towards the door.

“Martin!” Chris struggled but unfortunately, his skills lay in endurance and agility, not so much strength. He began to panic as the distance between his brother grew. No matter how bad the situation, they had always dealt with it together. He

couldn't just let them be separated!

Zach cackled gleefully at the exchange and led the guards escorting Chris out of the room, and back towards the main warehouse. Chris ceased his struggles in surprise when he saw the building walls lined with explosives; Zachbots still putting them up.

As the older Kratt was finally subdued, the guards handcuffed him as well, connecting it to a small loop in the ground. "What should we do with this one?" One of the men asked.

"Leave him. I have no use for him." Diego stalked back towards the door as several Zachbots entered, setting more explosives against the wall. "And I hate loose ends."

"Stop! Don't do this!" Martin pulled at his restraints as the humans evacuated the room, slamming the door shut behind them. He could hear the familiar sound of Zach's cargo plane engine warming, and the ticking of the detonators around him only fueled his panic. "Fuck!"

The Zachbots that were left behind to ensure his demise simply stared in indifference which somehow only made him more frustrated. Not only was he sitting in the middle of a ticking time bomb, but Chris was being sauntered away, likely to a remote location. Without his creature pod, they had no way of tracking him. Martin would be damned if he let his brother be alone with two villains. For a long time, Martin never thought that Varmitech would stoop so low, but it seemed he was capable of anything as long as enough money was involved. It made him sick.

He felt more than heard a ship taking off from somewhere near the warehouse. The walls shook as a vehicle passed overhead, presumably with his brother onboard. Martin doubled his efforts, desperately yanking on the handcuffs which only resulted in rubbing the skin on his wrists raw. He looked toward the explosives, they displayed a countdown of a little over a minute left. His eyes became moist as he began to beat the cuffs into the ground. He had to get out! He had to save Chris! The ground barely had a scratch, meanwhile, Martin's arms were on fire as he recklessly slammed them down.

"I can't, I can't," He blubbered, exhausted and aching, Martin sunk in on himself. It was impossible for him to break free. Chris was gone. He was about to be buried under 50,000 pounds of metal. There was absolutely nothing he could do.

When the building shook and a deafening bang ran through the building, Martin had almost assumed the explosives started to go off. But when the ceiling above him split open, and the *Tortuga's* anchor dropped, smashing a couple of Zachbots, He almost started crying.

"Martin!" Aviva slid down the anchor, immediately pulling out a handheld buzzsaw when she noticed the restraints. "Hold on, MK!"

"We gotta get out of here!" Martin warned as she began to cut through his cuffs. "This place is about to blow!"

"Wait, what about-" Aviva was interrupted as she freed Martin and he grabbed onto her, pulling her back towards the anchor. Grasping the metal coils with all their strength the *Tortuga* reeled them in, almost flinging them around in the air. The turtle began ascending at the same time as the warehouse lit up. Their momentum had them flying through the garage of the ship, a warm rush of air pushing them inside.

The force of the explosion rocked the ship to an almost horizontal tip before it sped off, away from the raging flames. Definitely not Jimmy's smoothest piloting, but necessary for the race against the explosives.

"Aviva! Martin!" Koki raced to their sides helping them off the floor. "Are you alright?!"

"I think so..." Aviva groaned, rubbing her neck from the harsh landing.

Koki moved to check over Martin, who admittedly was looking worse for wear with his tussled hair and a nasty black eye. She then noticed the absence of a certain green Kratt. "Wait, where's Chris?"

Aviva and Koki both turned expectedly to Martin as he caught his breath. The longer he took to answer the more dread filled their chests. Starting to assume the worst Aviva clutched Martin's shoulder, forcing him to look at them. "Martin, where is Chris?"

"Gone..." He breathlessly whispered. "T-They took him."

Koki would be ashamed to admit she was relieved. She didn't wish harm upon him, but at least he hadn't been in the warehouse. There was still a chance they could save him. "Who took him?"

Martin's gaze seemed to stare right past them. He was cold and trembling; he barely seemed to register the questions he was being asked. As his shallow breathing picked up in pace, Aviva and Koki went to hold him steady.

"I think he's going into shock," Aviva commented, putting a hand on the older Kratts' forehead.

"Who took him, Martin?" Koki coaxed in a soothing tone as she squeezed a reassuring hand on his arm.

"Zach, and..." Martin paused, attempting to remember the name they had been given through all the other chaos presently in his mind. "D-Diego."

"Zach," Aviva hissed accusingly.

"Diego?" Koki questioned.

"Hey, uh... no rush or anything but is everything going okay down there?" Jimmy's anxious voice rang through the comm system. "I'm kinda losing my mind a little up here."

“We’ll fill you in, in just a second, Jimmy,” Aviva responded into her creature pod. “Head near the closest water source, we can’t leave that fire unchecked in this dry climate.”

“Roger!” Jimmy sounded off, a tad more confident. As long as they weren’t immediately directing him to a hospital, he at least knew the team was okay.

Koki and Aviva helped Martin to his feet, both helping support him by holding onto his arms and began carefully escorting him to the main hub.

“We’re gonna figure this out, Martin,” Aviva comforted as he trembled up the stairs. “And then we’re gonna find Chris. I promise.”

Chris slammed his fist against the cage in Zach’s cargo plane once more, resulting in nothing but an echo that was ignored by all the Zachbots in the proximity. He had heard the blast of the warehouse and felt the slight turbulence in the plane from the aftershock. He was trying his best to not let his anxiety overtake him, but it was a tad difficult when the evidence was stacked against him.

He kept repeating in his mind that the team had their location; they had been on their way. They freed Martin before it was too late. His brother was most definitely safe and not blown to bits.

The affirmations weren’t really helping.

He tried to focus on anything else, lest he spiral into a wheezing, hyperventilating mess, but the only other thought that could occupy his mind was the intentions of the Villains who were responsible for this. They had stripped him of his creature power suit immediately upon boarding; Zach practically skipped away as if he were a child receiving a new toy. Besides his brother, his creature power suit was one of the only other things Chris felt he could draw strength from. Without it, he was just a research biologist who was really good at climbing. There wasn’t much his degree could help with from this cell.

He dreaded the knowledge of what Zach intended to do with the suit. Aviva’s life research was under that vest, and he felt like a failure for allowing it into the hands of a maniac. What’s worse is they expected him to wear it once Zach was done with it. The experimental technology was so fragile; there’s no telling how it could react to an outsider meddling with its function. The only thing that brought him comfort was the fact that no matter what Zach did, the vest would always be *his*. They could turn him into whatever animal they wanted, but Chris would be the only one who could wield it.

Hopefully, he would be out of this mess before he even had to worry about that. Once again his mind brought him back to Martin and his chest ached with worry. If Martin were here he would probably start making fun of Zach’s interior designing skills, and remind Chris to not look so hopeless when their friends always have their backs.

So looking around the room, Chris decided that this was a very ugly ship. And for the time being, he would trust that the team came to the rescue as always, and soon they’ll come for him too.

He just had to think a little like Martin for the time being.

Chapter 3 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/134975608>)

Notes:

Welcome to Chapter 3!

As always kudos and comments are much appreciated <3

Martin was falling apart.

Team *Tortuga* had been practically scouring the globe for any trace of Zach or the mysterious villain, Diego. But after three days of absolutely no progress, the team was beginning to lose steam. The missing elephant herd had turned up; found near the warehouse explosion. They were relieved for the safety of the animals, but also crushed as they couldn’t use the poaching trade to track down Diego. Zach’s cargo ship had the use of cloaking technology, and he was smart enough to know when to lay low for a while.

Ultimately they had absolutely nothing, and Martin was losing his mind over it. He had barely slept beyond small naps in between search exhibitions, and besides Jimmy’s anxious snacking, no one had really touched the fridge.

They were currently searching all of Zach’s known hideouts and compounds, trying to cover all of their bases. Fortunately, Zach owned a fairly well-known company and it was easy to find information on all of his properties. Unfortunately, Zach owned a fairly well-known company and he had a *lot* of properties.

Martin knew he was overusing the creature power suit. The familiar soreness and raging headache every time he deactivated was the first clue. Aviva would have confiscated the suit by now had this been under normal circumstances. Instead, she kept his vitals open in a small window on her computer and shoved an electrolyte-packed beverage in his hands every time he came back from a search. When she would occasionally demand he take a nap, Martin obliged, knowing that the short breaks were the only reason she allowed him to continue like this. He couldn't afford to be benched from the suit right now. He also knew he couldn't go on full speed for much longer either.

Martin knew the severe consequences of overusing the creature power suits. He experienced it firsthand when the vests were still in early testing. He had felt so sick and weak, he was bedridden for a week. Despite the migraine, he could still remember the lecture Aviva had given him about how lucky he was his heart didn't give out.

The suits had evolved a lot since those days, but even so, they just weren't built to be worn forever. Even on their longer creature adventures, when they would follow a special animal to observe their lifecycle, Martin and Chris would tag team it. One would stay with the animal while the other feasted on special protein bars and snooze for a little back on the ship, before trading out again.

The more Martin thought about it, this search was almost the same concept, just without the trading places.

Having just returned from practically trashing an entire Varmitech storage facility in the black bear suit, Martin was reminded once again of how amazing his team was. He knew they were forfeiting rest as well to monitor him on his outings and scour the web for any possible Zach sightings. Even Jimmy had been keeping busy, contacting all the Wild Kratts Kids to see if they had spotted any suspicious activity. Aviva once again shoved a drink pouch and a protein bar into his hands and forced him into a chair. He couldn't be more grateful for them.

"I've been going through the data you sent us from the storage facility," Koki announced without even looking away from her screen. Her fingers flew across the keyboard, sifting through folders. "Besides shipment information and product inventory, there's nothing here."

"Nothing in the warehouse either," Martin responded through gulps of his drink, wanting to speedrun his rest so they could proceed to the next search on the list. "There weren't even that many Zachbots."

"Maybe we're going about this the wrong way..." Aviva thoughtfully commented, pacing the hub of the *Tortuga*. "I wish we had more info on this Diego guy; then we could be tracing his steps as well and seeing where they may have intercrossed with Zach."

"I've been doing what I can to research this guy, but besides the fact Diego is an extremely common name in the western hemisphere, I don't even have a picture of the guy to go off of," Koki complained, opening up her research into animal poachers. "The best clue I have is the elephant trade, but I can't find any poachers named Diego that specialize in elephants."

One of the smaller screens that Jimmy had been occupying suddenly rang with an incoming call. "It's a Wild Kratt Kid emergency message!" Jimmy called.

The rest of the team rushed over as the pilot answered, hope filled their chests that someone had finally spotted the wealthy inventor or had a solid lead to investigate instead of chasing loose threads. Upon the call connecting the crew could see one of their kids from central Asia. "Wild Kratts! You need to come quick!" The camera panned over to a bright pink jet that stood out against the snowy mountains. "Donita Donata has been rounding up baby snow leopards!"

Martin couldn't help but deflate in exhaustion. Couldn't these villains just take a couple days off? They had purposely excluded the information of Chris being missing in their requests for Wild Kratts Kids to keep an eye out for Zach. They didn't want any of the kids to panic and most certainly didn't want the other villains to get any word of it. The last thing they all needed was the villains using their weakened state as an opportunity to enlist harm upon wildlife. Aviva's smile was strained as she took over the call. "Thank you so much for letting us know! We'll be there soon so don't worry, niño."

As the call ended, the team looked expectantly at Martin. Whether or not they halted their search would be his decision to make.

The older Kratt didn't meet their eyes as he hesitated. He couldn't just let Donita get away with capturing endangered animals, but he also couldn't give up his search for Chris. Either way, he would be neglecting his duties as a big brother or as a zoologist. The pulsing headache he was sporting started to roll into a raging pound, and he jumped when a soft hand found his shoulder.

"Chris would understand," Aviva comforted, already aware of his inner turmoil. "And we can keep looking as soon as we're done."

Finally, he nodded. "Right." He gave a thankful smile to the team. "Jimmy set a course for Asia."

Chris groaned as consciousness returned to him. Blinking away the moisture in his eyes, the dull metal walls of the ceiling reminded him that he hadn't just been dreaming of Zach's annoying voice in the proximity. Trying to turn his head felt like moving a boulder; he winced in the effort. Oh right, he had been drugged, an unfortunately common theme in the last few days. Well, Chris assumed days. He hadn't exactly been given a clock.

As he willed for the clarity that sobriety brought him, he also dreaded being brought conscious once more. Apparently, the villains found him more cooperative under sedation. Which to be fair, Chris had already gotten a lucky kick to Zach's gut the second the Zachbots opened his cell. That had earned him a good ol' 50,000 volts of electricity via taser, but it had been incredibly worth it. The only reason they would be letting the drugs wear off again is to do another trial run.

Reprogramming the creature power suit must've been harder than Zach thought because the last time Chris was awake, the vest did nothing but spark and make a concerning noise. That had Diego blow a fuse. The dynamic between the man with the gold mask and Zach was also very confusing. He was constantly just watching. In brief moments of clarity, Chris could remember looking out of his cell to find the man just staring him down. The mask hid most of the man's face so it was hard to assume what he was thinking but Chris was sure it was nothing good. The way Diego would dissect him with his eyes, as if analyzing every single way he could exploit him made Chris squirm at the thought. Zach at least monologued his plans; Chris didn't like being left in the dark.

Finding feeling back in his fingers, Chris flexed his hand into a fist. When his fingers found a grip on a spandex material. Lulling his head to the side, the younger Kratt realized he was wearing black long sleeves. The material went down to his knuckles, a hole in the side for his thumb, and on his palm was a red rectangular pad, similar to the green ones from his CPS gloves. His eyes traveled up his arm to his chest where the material seemed more padded. It had transitioned to a dark green and the angular red paw print is what finally made the gears click. This was his creature power suit.

The door to his cell clicked as two lackeys and a couple of Zachbots swarmed in. Chris barely had the strength to struggle as they lifted him from under his arms and dragged him out. While they made their way to presumably Zach's lab again, Chris was able to take in the rest of his foreign outfit. The vest had been fitted into a full-body suit. The green material transitioned to black once more at his knees and sturdy shoes were built in as well. In Chris' opinion, it was a fashion tragedy.

To Chris' surprise, he found himself in the cockpit of the aircraft, Zach and Diego waiting for his arrival.

"So, what do you think of your brand new creature power suit?" Zach laughed, unable to contain his excitement at the sight of the disorientated Kratt.

"You couldn't spare at least a consultation from Donita on this one?" He quipped, satisfied when Zach's smirk turned to a snarl.

"Enough squabbling, Varmitech." Diego interrupted, always straight to the business. "Does it work?"

"Of course, it works!" Zach gasped in offense. "And even better than before. You don't even need creature power disks! Ghost activations gave me access to every animal already in the database."

Chris cringed at the explanation. Aviva made the creature power disks for a reason. Without them refreshing the suit's data on the proper animal, ghost activations could become corrupted and incredibly unstable. He somehow doubted that Zach programmed a failsafe for the lack of power disks.

"Then stop feeding your ego and hand over the activation switch already," Diego growled.

Zach rolled his eyes, holding out some sort of smartwatch. "Your lack of gloating is really diminishing our villain reputation."

Snatching the watch, Diego fixed it on his wrist and began fiddling with the controls. "I have the perfect errand for you, gatito."

Realizing he regained the ability to stand, Chris was shoved forward by the men holding him; practically thrown at Diego's feet. Correcting his balance, Chris anxiously looked up at the man. He wasn't restrained, but something was telling him if he ran he wouldn't get very far. At the unhinged excitement in Zach's eyes, he was almost willing to try regardless. He knew they were about to activate the suit and a shiver of terror ran down his spine. Sure, his job was practically to be a test dummy for experimental technology, but he trusted Aviva with his life. Not to mention Zach couldn't hold a candle to her radiant mind. Chris was half expecting the suit to just instantly evaporate him the moment it was forcibly booted up, but when Diego finally pulled the trigger, he *wished* it had.

Pure agony was the only way to describe the process. It was as if he could feel his muscles rip apart and reconstruct themselves. It was sharp like needles pricking his skin and also blunt like a hammer to his organs. His vision whited out and when it cleared again he was on his knees gasping for air as if he had just run a marathon.

Glancing up, Chris noticed the shock on Zach's face. That apparently wasn't supposed to happen. Looking down again, he recognized the stripes on his arms, a Florida panther. Instincts that he did not recognize as his own instantly flooded his mind. He was used to certain creature powers having a more demanding instinctual feeling, but nothing quite like this.

Danger. Attack. Defend. It seemed to scream at him, and he was compelled to obey. Suddenly he was *scared*, he was *angry*. He was only aware that he pounced at the villains after his feet already left the ground. Claws unsheathed, ready to skin his prey, Diego's hand launching out and grasping his throat was the only obstacle.

A stream of electricity ran through the suit causing him to whimper and thrash as his oxygen was restricted as well.

"You don't do *anything* unless I tell you to," Diego hissed, bringing the panther's face up to his own before unceremoniously dumping him back into the ground in a withering mess.

The electricity finally ceased and Chris was left gasping at Diego's feet.

"Now... I have some unfinished business with an old partner of mine." Diego stalked over to the console of the plane, pulling a lever that had the ship rattling as the door opened. "Let's just say I owe him a visit." Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, Diego knelt to the ground, allowing Chris to pick up the scent.

Chris initially hissed at the intrusion of space before a new instinct overcame him.

Listen. Obey. Search. This one felt even more foreign, almost artificial. Chris soon found himself in a jungle territory, stalking through the foliage completely silent. The freedom didn't even properly occur to him. He felt blinded as if the suit was closing off his awareness, swallowing his intellect and replacing it with the animalistic need to survive. Brief moments of clarity led to fear. Where was he? What was he doing? But they came in short bursts, pushed down again as Chris lost himself to the animal.

At some points, his vision felt hazy, like he could feel the breeze on his face, and hear the mosquitoes buzz, but he completely unaware of what he was doing.

Other times it felt painfully clear, like he was watching a movie through his eyes; trapped inside a body he could not control. He saw some sort of base... There were cages and animals. There were people, bad people. There were guns.

Other times he just felt completely numb, like he was floating in a void, unable to even question how he got there. Trickle of feelings would penetrate the void. Fear. Pain. Anger. But he could not identify what provoked them.

He felt when his claws had pierced something. Warm liquid spilled over his paws. He felt accomplished, like he eliminated the danger. The numbness took back over and he relished in its warmth for a long time. There weren't as many questions in the numbness; it wasn't as confusing. Chris decided he liked the numbness.

But then clarity hit once more like a weight dropping onto his chest, leaving him wheezing and dizzy. He heard triumphant laughter, and his head shot up in a panic. What happened? He was confused to find himself standing in front of Zach and Diego. A sense of *deja vu* washed over him as if he had just woken up from a dream.

"It works! It works! It works! It works! It works! It works!" Zach was prancing around, cackling. "Take THAT Aviva! I can make creature power suits better than you can!"

Chris glanced down at his hand, his human hand, and was appalled to find it stained red. The small breath he regained had wheezed out of his lungs once more and the organ seemed to halt its function. What happened? What did he *do*?

His lungs restricted further, a telltale sign of a panic attack. He needed Martin. Martin would know what to do. ***Where was Martin?***

"Indeed, it does," Diego commented, ignoring the way Chris' shoulders trembled as he continued to stare at his bloodstained fingernails. "I must say, incredible work."

Zach chuckled, absorbing the praise like a sponge. "Of course, of course! Now that we have our own little Kratt, we can do whatever we want!"

"On the contrary, Mr. Varmitech..." Diego's tone darkened as he powered on the watch. "Now that the creature power suit is operational, you've become expendable to me."

"W-wait what-" Zach halted in his celebration as Diego stalked towards the plane's controls. More of his guards seemed to sulk out of the shadows, and the atmosphere turned tense. "Diego... H-hold on, let's not do anything rash here!"

"Now, gatito, why don't we show Varmitech here to the exit?" Diego mockingly addressed Chris before activating the suit once more.

"No... No NO NO YOU CAN'T DO THIS!-" Zach shrilled as Chris felt the suit boot up against his will.

This time the numbness was welcomed with desperate arms.

Chapter 4 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/135452170>)

Notes:

Hi, welcome to chapter 4!

I'm really glad you guys are enjoying my story so far! Thank you so much for all the lovely comments <3

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_4_endnotes\)](#)..)

Donita and Dabio practically begging them to take the baby snow leopards was not exactly what the Wild Kratts expected upon arriving in Central Asia.

"They've already clawed through TWO of my Donita original gowns!" She wailed as she tried to catch one of the small wild cats that pounced around her ship. "DABIO, GET THEM OUT!"

"I'm trying Donita!" Dabio attempted to tackle a cat, only for it to run away at the last moment, leaving Dabio to faceplant on the ground.

"Well, this is... different," Martin commented, taking in the scene of the lavish jet that was littered with claw marks and untamed wild cats. "Not to encourage your evil schemes or anything, but wouldn't it be easier to just use your pose beam?"

"I WOULD-" The designer hissed, "But SOMEBODY broke it!"

"I didn't do it, Donita!" The blonde hunk tried to defend himself, but a snow leopard jumped from where it perched on the curtains and clung to his face.

"Then why isn't it doing anything?!" She picked up the remote again and viciously spammed the buttons. The floating pink orb stood still as if mocking her. "AUGH! You piece of trash!"

She launched the remote at the orb which made a crackling sound as it connected. Both the orb and the remote fell unceremoniously to the floor, but when the circular machinery began to glitch and fizzle, the room stood silent.

Martin had already begun scooping up several leopards in his arms as Donita stomped forward to investigate. "What the?-" She picked up her pose beam and the hologram fizzled out, revealing a humorously round Zachbot in its place.

She gasped, drawing the attention of Martin and Dabio. "ZACHARY!" She exploded, throwing the bot onto the ground and smashing it with her heeled boot. "When I get my hands on that SLIMY LITTLE-"

Martin almost dropped the leopards in shock, could this possibly be a lead? A clue? "Wait, Donita! Do you have security cameras on your jet?"

"Do I look like a commercial airline to you? Of course, I have cameras on my Jet!" She placed her hands on her hips in annoyance. "I keep priceless works of art in here!"

Martin gently dropped the cats once more as he desperately walked up to the fashion designer. "Please, Donita! I need to see that footage!"

"Ew, no." She looked over him in disgust. "We're enemies remember, dear Martino?"

"I know, I know!" He pleaded. This could be their only chance; their only lead back to Chris! "But Zach was here, recently! I'm looking for him, and the footage may give me a clue."

"And why should I help you?" She shoved a finger into the older Kratts' chest, aggressively pushing him back.

"Because Zach stole from you! Don't you think he deserves to be ratted out for that?" Martin laughed nervously. He glanced around at all the cats still wreaking havoc on the interior of the plane. "Besides, I might be able to help you with your feline problem."

Donita glanced back as Dabio slipped while trying to sneak up on one of the leopards once more and she let out a defeated groan. "Fine. But don't consider this a favor, Kratt!"

Martin had updated the team back in the Tortuga and not long after, Koki had joined Martin in the jet to go over the security footage.

Donita stood, leaning against the wall with a look of barely contained tolerance on her face. Koki quickly sifted through the ship's security logs before finally pausing when a black figure came into the frame. "There!"

Martin leaned in toward the screen as she rewinded the clip again and played it from the beginning, at normal speed. The interior lights were low and the film data displayed it was in the middle of the night. They eagerly watched the figure tip-toe his way through the jet, clumsily tripping on almost every piece of furniture. The cameras caught him suspiciously looking around as he grabbed the pose beam orb and shoved it into a duffle bag; replacing it with his own Zachbot.

"That little THEIF!" Donita raged, slamming her hands down on the console.

Looking at the footage data again, Koki was able to get the date. "Donita, where were you two days ago?"

"I was wrapping up my show in Paris, he must have broken in while I was at the after-party," She willingly gave the information, too angry to remember the grudge she held against them.

"But why would Zach need your pose beam?" Martin questioned, forcing his mind to stray from the more disturbing connection to Chris being kidnapped only a day prior.

"Hell if I know, but he does owe me a few grand." She exhaled sharply. "My supplier is not cheap."

"When we find him, we'll pass the message." Koki winked, taking a few pictures of the screen before patting Martin on the shoulder, signaling she's got everything she needed.

"Thanks Donita!" Martin happily waved as he and Koki made their way out of the cockpit.

"Don't consider this a truce, Kratt!" Donita called after them. "And take those evil cats with you!"

Chris groaned as he felt himself dropping to his knees on a cold surface. His head felt heavy, and a piercing static-like headache fizzed under his skin. His arms trembled under the strain of holding himself up, and he was wheezing as if he had just finished a race.

Being unable to remember what he had just been doing felt only mildly concerning in the moment. Until flashing visions of claws and fangs surfaced in his mind, causing him to freeze in suspense.

Oh right... he was using the suit.

Well, technically *Diego* had been using the suit. Chris just felt like the little meat puppet that was wearing it.

As if on cue Diego snapped at one of the men that always seemed to be at his beck and call. "Take him to the cell, and get him cleaned up. I can't stand a messy workspace."

Chris was barely cohesive enough to notice the way he was lifted from his arms and dragged through the cargo ship. He hadn't been in the most lucid headspace recently but the younger Kratt could at least recall a falling out between Zach and Diego which led to Diego taking the plane in the divorce. He noticed as he was dragged towards the cell the interior was slightly different from what he remembered. The cargo hold was carrying a couple of vehicles and his cell now resided down one of the many halls in the upper level of the plane. It was more like a room than a corner with bars. He at least appreciated the cot placed in the corner, but was simultaneously offended that he was expected to be moving in.

When he was dragged into a smaller room adjacent to the cell, he couldn't help but drowsily quip, "Oh, a bathroom all to myself too? How luxurious!"

The luxurious bathroom in question was more like a closet with a drain, of which he was rudely thrown to the floor of. He heard the sound of water starting to move in the pipes and was made aware that his hands felt grimy and sticky. Chris' gut wrenched when he caught sight of the color they were painted. The fact this wasn't the first time he had awoken to red-stained hands made him uncomfortable. What was even more uncomfortable was the way he was violently hosed off with freezing water.

He was at least feeling more sober now.

As such, the couple of guards let him have the decency to dry himself off and walk on his own to their next destination. He briefly considered refusing, however, the guards flaunting off their electrified rods persuaded him a little more.

As he was escorted back to the cockpit, Chris made note of the stiffness in his muscles. He was pretty accustomed to the physical strain of the creature power suits, but this was a different level of exhaustion. He felt like he would fall asleep if he stopped moving, and the headache did not budge on its relentless endeavor to drill at his skull. These were all symptoms of overusing the suit. Just how long had it been activated?

When the guards pushed him through the door of the cockpit, Chris was curious to find it empty. He was even more surprised by the way the door shut behind him, leaving him completely unsupervised. This was probably a test to see if he would try to escape.

And well... Chris didn't want to disappoint.

Pausing to look around the room for any hidden guards, he booked it to the large center console. He could go for the windows, but he figured he wouldn't get too far before the suit would be activated and have him recalled. Chris wouldn't consider being kidnapped a blessing, but he was at least grateful it was by a newbie. Most villains upon first meetings assumed the Kratts were just these adventure jocks who tested the gear made by the brilliant minds of the Tortuga crew. While that was partially true, the brothers were by no means uneducated. Chris was a biologist with a minor in engineering, he knew a thing or two about computers.

He also knew a thing or two about his team. Koki would be watching the globe for any sign of Chris like a hawk, and Chris was about to fire a flare.

Fingers flying across the control center, Chris was scouring the computer for any connection to Zach's unending arsenal of spy bots. The Wild Kratts always had a sneaking suspicion Zach had access to the Tortuga's comm system, and now was the time to find out. He just prayed Aviva's last update to get rid of any foreign hardware didn't work as flawlessly as she hoped. As he sifted through Zach's almost incomprehensive database, Chris' mind wandered back to the team.

He was sickly reminded of the last time he saw Martin, bruised and restrained on the floor. He shook his head, willing the image to leave. He had to trust in the team. Had to trust that they got there in time. The thought of his brother being dead was so unfathomable, that he had a physical reaction even considering it.

Chris would focus on finding a way out of here first; the team could meet him halfway. And then he'll be reunited with Martin and they would all laugh about how wild of an adventure this turned out to be. He shoved down the bubbling

feeling of anxiety rising in his gut. He would do this the only way he knew how, one step at a time.

Still he couldn't keep the thoughts restrained about what was happening with the creature power suit. Why was he blacking out so much? Why couldn't he control his own thoughts when it was activated? And most concerningly, just what had he been *doing* ?

As if descending to answer all his questions, the metal door to the cockpit slid open causing Chris to jump away from the console, cursing silently as he ran out of time.

"I see you've made yourself comfortable." Diego didn't sound worried as he stalked towards the brunette. He ignored the window on the screen that closed upon his entry.

Chris took a step back as he approached, warily watching his body for any sudden movements. The scene was strikingly similar to a cornered animal waiting for a moment of escape. "Who are you?" He decided to test his luck and gather some information while he had the chance.

"I thought we were past introductions." Diego slid into one of the chairs, confident in his power over his captive.

"I mean what do you want?" Chris clarified. The offer to sit was extremely tempting, his legs were wobbling like jelly and he felt that he would collapse soon. However, he refused to show weakness in front of Diego. "Just what are you trying to accomplish here."

"Aren't you supposed to be a scientist or something?" Diego rested his head on his fist, tilting the golden mask that still covered his face. "It's pretty easy to figure out, Kratt. I hunt animals, I sell animals, and I dispose of the people that try to stop me." He pulled out a thick cigar and lit it. "All of which you've been very helpful with, so I should thank you for that."

Chris cringed in disgust. He remembered the way blood had been caked in the crevices of his fingernails. Suddenly he felt nauseous. He felt weak and powerless. He barely had the strength to stand, much less throw a punch, and any hope of escape was extinguished by the restricting suit encasing his body. Trying to think of the positives, Chris noted he at least was lucid, something he couldn't confidently say prior to this conversation. He was escorted here, talking to Diego with his mind in a competent state for a *reason* . "You can't do this. Those animals are living beings; they-"

"You were so much more tolerable when the suit was on," Diego interrupted, rolling his eyes. He seemed bored with their interaction and stretched out of the chair. "I've been doing some digging on you, Christopher. Scholarships, research funding, and sponsors? You've got some pretty important people backing up your little world tour of bird watching..."

Chris furrowed his brows, offended that the team's years of hard work was being reduced to an observational hobby. Before he could correct Diego's language, the man continued.

"...Certain important people that I would rather not be on the radar of." He took a long draw of his cigar. "Normally you wouldn't be worth the effort, but seeing as you're currently the only person capable of operating my new secret weapon, I'd like to strike a little deal."

Chris eyed Diego warily. "What?" A jolt of fear ran down his spine. Chris was literally being held against his will; he had nothing to barter. What could Diego possibly want from him that he hadn't already taken?

"I know all about your little research team with the flying turtle. Frankly, I would like to avoid a confrontation as much as possible." Diego stalked closer, putting a hand onto Chris' flinching shoulder and leaned down closer to his ear. "It would be a shame if something were to happen to them."

"Don't you *dare* even think about it," He hissed, filled with a rage that was foreign to him; only bubbling when something threatened the people he loved.

A terrifying grin broke out on Diego's face. "You know your people and their systems better than anyone else. Which means you know how to avoid them the best."

The younger Kratt's stomach dropped as he realized where this conversation was heading.

"Help me keep your team off my trail, so we won't have to make any... unfortunate confrontations." Diego smothered his cigar in an ashtray sitting on the console.

Chris hardened his glare. Could this even really be considered a deal? It was more of a threat than anything else. He wanted nothing more than for the *Tortuga* to come bazing out of the sky, but then his thoughts jumped back to the reprogrammed suit. No, it was too dangerous. He couldn't remember what he'd already done in the suit but he knew it was... really bad. Until he found a way to take back control, he couldn't risk running into them. Especially after what Diego had just implied. They had to stay away!

Chris felt despair consumed by anger. Diego had pranced in here offering Chris a choice as if he actually had one. It was just a flaunt of power; to prove he was in control even when the suit was off. To remind Chris how utterly helpless he was in this situation.

"Keep my friends away or you'll kill them? What a deal," the sarcasm slipped from Chris' mouth before he could stop it.

Diego laughed, amused by his frustration. "If you'd rather get it out of the way, we could just go find them now..."

“NO!” Chris almost launched forward, barely restraining the sheer panic that had just overtaken his body. “No! I’ll do whatever you want, just stay away from them!”

“See? That wasn’t so hard,” Diego cooed mockingly, as he tapped Chris’ cheek gently with his palm. “Get started on tracking the energy levels of the *Tortuga*. I know that ship uses a unique power source, and I’m sure you know exactly how to find it.”

Chris couldn’t help but look away in shame. He refused to let the tears of frustration bubble past the corners of his eyes. His head was already so foggy and he couldn’t think straight; all he wanted to do was pass out for a few hours. Instead he was taking orders like a dog because he was too stupid, *too weak* to figure out how to escape.

Pleased with the results of their conference, Diego made his way towards the door, his expensive shoes making a clicking sound as he walked. “And do hurry, Christopher. I would hate to *accidentally* run into them.”

The door closed behind the man with the gold mask, but not before two strong men with guns slung over their shoulders came in and positioned themselves right at the door.

Chris sighed, ignoring his audience and turned back towards the plane’s console. Reopening the previous window, he saw the line of code that belonged to a spybot. It was titled “Wildrats live fail cam.” Hesitantly, Chris opened it and typed out a kill code to the bot. This could be his only means of contacting his team, but more importantly it could be a way for Diego to spy on them. His mind raced as he tried to come to a solution. Chris considered an emergency distress signal, only for when he figured out what to do about the reprogrammed suit. However, he didn’t know how long that would take, and the longer he left the bot active, the more he risked Diego finding it.

The spybot was buried in a very unorganized database of active Zachbots; it was possible Diego didn’t even know how to access this code. Chris was at a disadvantage... Diego knew about him, his skills, his team, his family... But Chris didn’t know a single thing about his captor, besides his lack of morals. Against his better judgement, Chris aborted the kill code. Guilt immediately consumed him when he buried the spybots code again, knowing he was risking the safety of his entire team in doing so. Still he couldn’t bring himself to sever the only connection to them. It was selfish, and it settled in Chris’ stomach like a rock.

Instead of dwelling on how such a small decision felt like a betrayal to his closest friends, Chris busied himself on searching for the *Tortuga*’s tellurium crystal energy signature. As such a rare energy source, there aren’t so many vehicles powered off the stuff. It was painfully easy to pick up a trail of the unique energy using Zach’s advanced satellite technology. Chris cringes as he realized he was pretty much handing over the information that would allow anyone to track their every move. *What if this got out to the other Villains?*

He reluctantly brought up the map and set up a tracking program that was locked onto the *Tortuga*. He had to. *Because what if Diego found them first?* Clutching his chest as anxiety filled his lungs, Chris finished setting up the tracker and practically collapsed into one of the seats, unable to take a full breath. Chris was at least a little surprised he fought off the panic attack this long.

He was too dizzy to struggle when the guards came over and started dragging him out of the room. Chris’ pent up emotional turmoil quickly spiralled the panic attack into a full-on sensory overload. The guards footsteps were too loud; sounding like cannons echoing through the halls. The lights were too bright, burning through his closed eyelids like miniature suns. He was too exhausted to be embarrassed when he visibly started crying as the rough texture of the ground felt like knives scraping against his skin. Even the texture of the cot they threw him against was like sandpaper on his fingers, and the only relief was the fact that the guards shut the door leaving him in pitch darkness.

Chris vaguely acknowledged he was trembling, gripping his hair a little too hard, and beating the side of his head with a fist a little too strong. He had long outgrown these destructive coping habits. He tried to think back and remember how to stop. When they were kids, Martin would pull his hands away, giving him something else to grip or tear apart. He would probably offer some ear plugs or a comfort item, like the weighted blanket that was always folded so neatly on the foot of Chris’ bed.

He took a sharp intake when he remembered that *Martin wasn’t here*. He was alone. A deep sob escaped his throat as the exhaustion and fear from everything that had happened finally caught up to him. He began gripping at the chest of his suit, attempting to tear it off. It felt so tight on his skin that he couldn’t expand his lungs properly. The straps on the back of the suit held strong, preventing him from gaining any leverage against them.

Chris cried harder when the suit didn’t budge and all he could do was let his headache and body tremors lul him into a restless sleep.

Notes:

In case anyone is curious, Diego isn't actually afraid of the Wild Kratts. He is plenty confident in his ability to resist them. However, it's just another way to control Chris. Even when the suit isn't activated. Bro is mansplain, manipulate,

manslaughtering his way through this fanfic

Chapter 5 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/135874726>)

Notes:

THIS CHAPTER IS SO LONG- GREAT HEAVENS

It's technically two chapters wrapped into one because I couldn't find a good stopping point!!! So yeah!!!

Thanks for reading as always! Kudos and Comments are always appreciated <3

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#) (#chapter_5_endnotes).)

Aviva had been working diligently to track down Zach from the small information they gathered off Donita. Starting off in Paris, they were able to find some eye witnesses on a mysterious black cargo plane. Finding at least the general direction Zach must have been traveling, they narrowed down their search to North and South America.

And amidst their scrambling and sifting through information, Zach had all put given himself away when he broadcasted an emergency distress signal somewhere in south Florida.

"It could be a trap..." Aviva warned as Jimmy ran to punch in the new coordinates.

"I'm willing to risk it." Martin's face was set in a hard glare of determination; a focus he did not usually spare unless it was utmost dire.

At his determination, Koki and Aviva nodded in agreement, giving the all-clear for Jimmy to take off full speed towards Florida.

Martin prematurely activated his creature power suit using some shedded fur he and Chris gathered from Little Howler at their last meeting. When they touched down, almost on top of the broadcast location, Martin had charged out of the *Tortuga*, looking around desperately for any sign of the dark plane.

Aviva was close behind him, her robo arm attached to her purple backpack and she held the remote as if it were a pistol. The tension grew as the tropical forest around them layed silent besides the hum of cicadas.

"Were we... too late?" Aviva questioned, lowering her guard slightly.

Before Martin could even consider a deeper search, a shrill cry erupted from the bushes. "FINALLY! SOMEONE CAME!"

Both Aviva and Martin jumped when Zach came tumbling out, looking a bit worse for wear and ran up to them, arms outstretched in joy.

Martin was too stunned to stop Zach from gripping the front of his creature powersuit, bringing their faces uncomfortably close together. "You gotta get me out of here! There's so many icky bugs and dirt and mud and SNAKES!" the inventor looked like he was about to cry.

The blue wolf's eye twitched and to everyone's surprise, socked Zach in the face with a balled fist.

"Martin!" Aviva gasped yet did not make any advances to stop the older Kratt as he marched over to a stunned Varmitech and lifted him off the ground by the collar of his shirt.

It was Martin this time that brought their faces closer. "Where is Chris?!"

Zach's joy was replaced with panic and he struggled to get out of the fierce grip to no avail. "I- I don't know, I swear!"

A feral growl erupted from Martin's throat causing Zach to get a good look at the sharp incisors of the wolf suit. He continued with his pleading, "D-Diego stole my plane and abandoned me h-here! I don't have m-my Zachbots or a-anything! He's the one that took your brother!"

"And you helped him." Martin threw Zach to the ground, towering over him in a very uncharacteristic display of aggression.

Aviva stood awkwardly to the side, not sure if she should intervene or let it play out. Her rage for Zach currently outweighed her concern for Martin's behavior, so she straightened her shoulders and let Martin take the lead.

"Here's whats gonna happen, Zach." Martin kneeled to the ground, still towering over the cowering inventor. "You're going to tell us everything you know. Because if you don't, we're getting back on that ship and blocking your SOS transmission, and you'll be stuck here for the rest of your life."

"NO! NO!" Zach pleaded, he looked around anxiously at the wilderness around him. "I'll tell you everything, I promise! Just please don't leave me here!"

So they loaded him aboard the *Tortuga*, and Zach proceeded to tell them everything that had transpired in the past week. From how he took a job with Diego to capture the elephant herd, to how the commission spiralled out of control

with Diego finding interest in the creature power suits, to Zach stealing Donita's pose beam to utilize the technology in his reprogrammed creature power suit, and to the eventual betrayal of Diego using his own technology against him. He recalled in detail how after Chris had cornered him, Diego shoved him out of the skybound cargo plane, and he miraculously survived by landing in a small body of water. Without any Zachbots around, all he could do was create a small transmission device using his phone.

Aviva had paled at the horror of her creature power suits being tampered with, taken apart and put back together like some sort of toy. Even more appalled that the modified technology was being used on one of her closest friends.

She had furiously slapped Zach across the face when he nervously admitted to meddling with the suit. Nobody had moved to stop her.

After threatening Zach into explaining exactly what he did to the suit, she threw herself back into her work, running scenarios on ways she could somehow fix it. Or at least disable the controller Zach had built for it.

Racking up a nice little case file filled with evidence of wildlife endangerment, Koki handed off the evidence as well as Varmitech himself to the police district where Varmitech's mansion sat in New Jersey.

The team knew he would just bale himself out in a couple of days whenever it was posted, but they at least had the satisfaction to know he would be out of their way for the time being.

With a break in the case, the team's efforts were reignited and they dove back into their search, hoping Chris would be safe and home soon.

Except that had been over a month ago.

A month of running themselves into the ground, chasing rumors and empty leads.

The only good thing that had come out of this was the fact that the team was slowly busting major poaching groups and rescuing countless endangered species. Koki had gotten pretty deep in the communications of the poaching world. The Tortuga would get word of Diego partaking in a trade, and show up to find a messy trail of bodies. The gory scenes always twisted Martin's gut in a sense of wrongness. If Zach was telling them the truth, Chris was likely behind this. Except Chris would never willingly hurt another person... This blood was on Diego's hands; Martin just prayed that Chris would be able to see it that way as well. Besides the messy scenes, there wasn't a trace of Diego. It felt like they were so close, but always just one step behind.

It was absolutely infuriating.

And amidst it all Martin was tearing himself apart with guilt. He recounted the day they were kidnapped so many times in his head, dissecting every mistake he made and how he contributed to the situation his brother ended up in. He should have checked the perimeter. He should have been quicker to react when they were attacked. He should have fought harder. He should have found a way to escape.

Chris was being used as a weapon in an industry they had spent their entire lives working against. He wondered what it was like to be forcefully activated in a creature power suit. The way Zach had described it sounded like marionette. Was Chris aware of what was happening? Was he witnessing the crimes Diego forced him to commit? Was he even conscious enough to realize his situation? If so, Did Chris know they were looking for him? Martin's heart ached everytime his mind strayed back to his organized and intelligent brother, and how Martin failed him.

Aviva would shoot him knowing looks anytime he got a little too quiet, wrapped up in his head. She had told him countless times to stop blaming himself, but she was being hypocritical in her reassurances. When Aviva found how they were using her technology to enact harm upon people, she had taken a very depressive spiral into guilt. She had apologized to the rest of the team countless times, almost in tears about how she never meant for her work to be used like this. She swore to find a solution, and to make sure no one would ever use the creature power suits for wrong ever again.

Of course the team would reassure her everytime that she had nothing to apologize for, and she could have never predicted anything like this would happen. Martin could confidently promise her that Chris wouldn't blame her either, and would temporarily free her from the guilt that drowned her.

After weeks of following Diego's trail, the crew decided they would take a few days to rest, recuperate, and come up with a plan. Diego seemed to be able to predict their every move, so continuing to chase after him had been completely pointless. All they were accomplishing was tiring themselves out and wasting resources.

"We need to make him come to us," Koki demanded as she scarfed down her long-overdue dinner. Jimmy had ordered a take-out spread for the crew, forcing them all to sit down and actually consume a meal for the first time in quite a while. Spontaneous snack breaks just weren't going to cut it.

"How are we supposed to do that?" Jimmy questioned, his feet propped up on the center consol. "It's not like we have anything he wants?"

"Maybe not..." Aviva sat straighter in her chair, a look of inspiration glossed over her face. "So why don't we find someone who does?"

Everyone's interest was peaked at that, and they leaned closer as Aviva devised her plan.

Most of Koki's research had been devoted to specifically Diego and other poachers, but in the next few days she focused solely on the people who were funding his excipades.

So, Koki got back to hacking radio frequencies and keeping an eye on the dark corners of the web that she had unfortunately been spending most of her time on the past month. She was scoping out for potential targets or deals with Diego. To her horror he seemed to be a very popular man to a disgustingly large number of collectors. All of the buyers seemed to be using alias' but that was only a small hurdle for the communications specialist of the Tortuga. Tracing down IP addresses and finding legal names, she also managed to take a peak into their many bank accounts.

When Koki noticed that a frequent customer of Diego had a large sum of money missing from their account, she knew it was time to strike and quickly intercepted the message. Pulling up phone logs from the account, she was able to pull out a very unsuspecting set of coordinates.

"It's go time!" She had pumped her fist in accomplishment as the rest of the crew ran to the console.

Preparing for the trade, Jimmy dropped Aviva and Martin off a couple hours journey out from the coordinates Koki had intercepted. Jimmy and Koki would be sure to stay a good distance away with the Tortuga to avoid being spotted near the meeting coordinates and possibly causing suspicion. While a giant turtle ship was objectively the coolest research vehicle on the field, it wasn't the most subtle, and they could accidentally scare the customer into relocating their chosen meeting grounds.

So Aviva and Martin took the createrra, speeding off into the green foliage of South America. As they neared the scheduled meeting point, anxiety began to build in Martin's chest. This could be their only opportunity to get Chris back. If they failed here, there was no telling what Diego would do to him.

There was no telling what Diego had *already* done to him. Or if the damage would be reversible...

The fear of losing his younger brother forever gripped his heart and closed off his throat. So when Aviva placed a sturdy hand on his shoulder and told him everything was going to be okay, all he could do was nod in response.

Chris watched as the Tortuga's signal headed over the Atlantic Ocean in the direction of Africa. Watching the small pin roam the map on a screen is usually what he found himself doing these days. He found comfort in the fact that Diego was worried enough to keep a distance with the Tortuga, Martin had to have survived. It's the only reason Chris concluded that made enough sense. He wasn't entirely sure how long it had been since this whole endeavor started, his memories blending together far too much to hold any construct of time. It felt like months, but Chris could only clearly remember maybe a couple days of that time.

He rubbed his head trying to massage away the constant headache he seemed to have. By now he was pretty familiar to the exhaustion and soreness he would awaken to when the suit was disabled. This particular morning had also blessed him with relentless nausea. He felt so disconnected from his own body at times, like he was looking through a pair of eyes that did not belong to him. Small glimpses he caught himself in reflective surfaces such as glass or water did little to help; he barely recognized what looked back at him. He tried to avoid the windows for this very reason.

His time outside of the suit was fairly uneventful. When he wasn't passed out, he would usually just watch his tracking map to sooth his concerns about his family's safety. As long as they were still moving, and away from him, they were still alive. He hadn't hurt them. *Not like the others...*

Flashes of memories would sometimes plague him. Faces of terror, both animal and human, as he would hunt and chase. All he could do is shake his head and force himself not to think about it. Wallowing in misery would do nothing to help him. Though his plans to find a way to permanently deactivate the suit hadn't gotten him very far either. Diego kept Zach's old lab locked up tight, and there was always a shadow of a guard following him around. For the most part, Diego left him to his own devices in between excipades, though Chris had no doubt he would be stopped should he try to leave the plane or start fiddling with the creature power suit.

Stupid. He would mutter to himself. Martin would have probably figured it out by now. He mentally slapped himself for even considering Martin being in his shoes. His dorky loveable brother would have withered at even the thought of hurting anybody. *Did it make Chris heartless that he seemed to be okay with it?* Even though Chris knew deep down he wasn't okay with it, not at all. He just compartmentalized better than most people.

Perhaps he could get Aviva involved somehow... surely she could find a solution. His thoughts trailed back to the spybot still active in the Tortuga. He could send a warning, an explanation. Chris glanced back to the guard watching him from a distance. His early resolve about figuring it out alone was crumbling and quickly. As long as they just stayed away, Diego would never know, right?

As he began sorting the logistics of finding a window of time in the cockpit without a guard being present, a voice crackled through the intercom.

“Kratt, report to the loading dock.” Diego’s message was short but it was enough to spark an immediate reaction out of Chris.

He knew what would happen should he leave Diego waiting too long. He shuddered at the fist-sized bruises that probably still lurked under the suit. His muscles protested as he exited the cockpit, but he did his best not to stumble. He hated appearing weak in front of the guards. It felt like they were all lions gazing upon him as the wounded herd member, ready to feast.

On his way down he felt the small shake of the plane that indicated they had touched down somewhere. When he emerged out onto the platform that overlooked the large loading bay, there were a dozen cages holding tigers at numerous life stages pacing around anxiously in the too-small metal crates. Chris’ heart got stuck in his throat at the sight... Tigers are extremely endangered, only about 3,900 left living in the wild. He couldn’t take his eyes off the wild cats as he made his way down the stairs, the only thing that made this worse was Chris knew he was responsible for their capture. Which meant he was also responsible for whatever happened to them next. And to think he called himself a creature adventurer? *Disgusting.*

He halted in front of Diego who seemed to just be getting off a phone call. “Load them up! Exchange is in 20 minutes.”

The guards all jumped into action, loading up the crates onto numerous vehicles and cargo trucks that were parked in the loading docks. Chris felt himself take a sharp intake when a cub started crying out in distress over being separated from its mother.

“This is a big order for a very important client,” Diego explained. “You’re coming with me for... reassurance that the agreed price does not change.”

“Right...” Chris nodded at the instructions but his voice seemed far off. He couldn’t take his eyes off the tigers.

A sick smile crawled onto Diego’s face as he watched Chris’ haunted gaze. “An impressive haul, Kratt. You should be proud.”

A spark of rage ignited behind Chris’ eyes and he whipped his head towards Diego, fists clenched. His mouth opened to insult but nothing came out. He recognized a spark of fear behind the action. Instead he locked his jaw, settling on a hateful stare, which only brought a deep laugh from Diego’s chest.

“Good choice,” Diego patted his cheek in mock affection before turning towards the large cargo doors which began to open in a loud whirring sound.

The trucks began to exit in a uniformed line, an off-terrain jeep was last in the formation and stopped right beside Diego where he and Chris boarded the vehicle. Chris stared out into the jungle terrain recognizing the foliage as South American. His rage had fizzled out and left sorrow. He was too embarrassed to make eye contact with anyone, just letting the heavily rooted ground rock him into a state of dissociation. He couldn’t even speak up to Diego anymore? What a coward. *Stupid.*

Perhaps maybe the deal would go wrong and Diego would keep the tigers. Though that would only delay their fate... Like most things these days, he opted to shoving it down and not thinking about it anymore. It wouldn’t help him right now. He just stared out into the blur of passing trees trying to name off as many species he could recognize.

When Martin and Aviva got close to the meeting coordinates, they shut off the Createra’s engine, and covered the vehicle in large fern leaves.

“You should stay here,” Martin whispered, taking a quick look around the jungle to ensure no one was nearby. “We have no idea how dangerous this could be.”

“Exactly why I’m not letting you go alone.” Aviva’s stare hardened as she slipped on her mobile invention kit.

Martin gave her a thankful smile as they resumed their journey on foot. The coordinates were just up ahead, where an exchange of goods should be taking place between an American with more money than he knew what to do with and a psychopathic animal poacher. The plan was entirely stealth. Sneak in and grab Chris while the big boss was distracted. Aviva had programmed a special creature power disk for Chris. One that should be able to release a disruptor code and shut down the suit. If the simulations she had been running were correct, this had a 98.7% chance of being successful.

As they neared a clearing they could hear sounds of people and several engines running. Aviva slid over the power disk to Martin who pocketed it. Gently crouching in the thick vines surrounding some makeshift camp, the pair observed as an older man in a suit made of animal skins walked out of a large tent, checking his watch. There was a cargo plane, not nearly as large as Zach’s, parked in the clearing. Its doors were open and several men were waiting near the entrance.

"It looks like we got here before Diego," Aviva observed.

"Barely," Martin replied as the air was filled with sounds of trucks rolling through the roots. A caravan of several trucks broke through the clearing, parking themselves on the opposite end from where Martin and Aviva were hiding. The last of the vehicles to make an appearance was a jeep, the man with the golden lion mask was unmistakable as he rode in the passenger's seat.

Martin and Aviva tensed as he opened the door to the vehicle, slamming it behind him, and multiple guards started unloading from the trucks, automated rifles slung behind their shoulders.

Martin's eyes darted around, trying to catch any familiar face of his brother. Just when he was starting to wonder if they had left him back on Zach's ship, a shorter, lankier form than the guards jumped from the back of the jeep, and walked up to Diego's side.

Martin couldn't keep the gasp from escaping him as he got a good look at his brother for the first time in over a month. He looked *exhausted*. His shoulders hung slightly, and he kept shifting his balance from one leg to the other, as if he would fall over if left completely upright. His face was hollow and the deep circles under his eyes were more prominent than any long-term creature adventure they had ever taken. What was most concerning were the visible streaks of grey hair that peaked through his bangs.

"Oh, Chris, What did they do to you?" Aviva's small whisper was full of heartache as she clenched the front of her shirt.

"Im getting him out." Martin's horrified gaze settled into one of determination as he silently crept from the bushes before Aviva could stop him.

He hid behind parked vehicles and barrels of supplies as the two traders made small talk as if they weren't about to perform a highly illegal trade.

The older Kratt inched closer, peaking behind one of Diego's cargo trucks to get a glimpse of their position. Chris was staying infuriatingly close to the man with the golden mask as a concerning amount of metal crates were being unloaded from the trucks. From the look of the buyer's attire of complete animal skins, Martin had a sick feeling he knew what his intentions were with all these animals.

Martin crawled underneath the truck, dodging a guard who circled around to the back, and held his breath as the combat boots stomped right past where he was previously lurking.

"You wouldn't mind if I checked out the product, would you, Diego?" The balding man in the animal skins stalked towards the line of crates. "You know I don't accept any... cosmetic damages."

"Of course." Diego extended a hand. "I can assure you they were unharmed in transportation."

With Diego's back turned towards the truck Martin was currently hiding under, he clenched his fist, and scurried out. It was now or never, he assumed. He inched closer, holding the disruptor power disk at ready. He was only a few feet away. Blood rushed in his ears and his heart began hammering in his chest. He could do this. He was so close! Chris was coming home!

Just when he reached out towards his brother's back, a large hand grabbed his wrist, yanking him back towards a burley guard. "Who the fuck are you?!"

The exclamation had all nearby heads swiveling in their direction as Martin's plan crumbled before his eyes.

"Martin?" A terrified gasp had Martin's eyes making contact with the horrified expression of his little brother.

Martin's heart was shattered all over again at the genuine terror in Chris' eyes. He looked absolutely haunted, and the way his shoulders trembled filled Martin with a rage he didn't know he was even capable of.

"Let my brother go!" Martin screamed at Diego, who seemed shocked by his appearance.

Though the surprise didn't last long, and soon his expression sneered into disgust and annoyance. "I do not tolerate interruptions." At a snap of his fingers, Diego's guards had pulled their guns from their resting places and leveled them towards the blue Kratt.

"DON'T HURT HIM!" Chris jumped at Diego, wrestling his arm which only resulted in a backhand sending him to the ground.

"I do not tolerate insubordination either." Diego spat in anger. He tapped his watch a few times, sending Chris' stomach to the ground as he heard the whirring mechanics of the suit powering up. "You'll regret that, Kratt."

Before Chris could warn Martin to run, a flash of green overtook his vision as the suit activated. He painfully thrashed on the ground as the corrupted ghost activation morphed his body, reshaping his internal structure, and plunged his consciousness back into the dark void of the suit.

The guard initially holding Martin had let go, cautiously backing away from the snarling jaguar that was left withering on the ground. Martin was rooted in place as brown eyes met his. Though these were not the same brown eyes as his brother, no. These were angry and lacked any recognition.

“Chris?” Martin held his hands up in a show of submission as his brother crawled into a pouncing position, snarling. “Chris it’s me, Martin!”

“He cannot hear you, Kratt.” Diego hissed. “Gatito, attack.”

Martin froze as his brother reacted as if a rope holding him back had suddenly been cut. He pounced forward at frightening speeds, claws unsheathed and aimed towards his neck.

Martin blinked as suddenly he was pulled to the side, Chris’ claws making a deafening scratching sound as he tore into the side of the truck that was directly behind Martin.

“It’s time to go!” Aviva yelled, racing towards the jungle as she hauled the stunned Kratt along with her. Gunshots began to ring out as they dived into the thick foliage of the jungle, thankfully giving them a small amount of cover.

“We can’t just leave!” Martin argued though he did not act to resist her pulling him further into the trees. “I was so close!”

“So were those bullets!” Aviva argued, racing towards where they left the Creature. She let go of Martin’s wrists, confident he would follow her, and pulled out her creature pod. “Tortuga, come in, Tortuga! We need an emergency pick up at our coordinates.”

The screen buzzed to life to a very concerned Koki. She wanted to ask more questions, but knew they probably did not have time to be answered, so instead she nodded, pinpointing the creature pod on the map. “On our way!”

Martin didn’t even hear the bounding leaps of a swift creature until a dark form was tackling him from the side. He vaguely heard a concerning shout from Aviva as a heavy weight tumbled him down a steep hill.

Reaching the bottom he recognized the claws that were digging into his shoulders and holding him to the ground. Martin reacted quickly holding out his forearm in front of his face, which was bitten down on, in an attempt to get to his neck. *Cats kill by strangulation*. Martin reminded himself. Despite the extra strength in the jaguar suit, Martin was miraculously able to shove Chris off, scrambling back onto his feet.

“Chris, you need to fight it!” Martin carefully began backing away as his brother stalked closer. “I know you don’t wanna do this, bro!”

If Chris could hear him, it didn’t show as he pounced again. Martin rolled out of the way, cradling his injured arm close to his chest.

“Martin, catch!” Aviva yelled from the top of the hill, throwing down a small pebble-like item.

Martin dived forward, grasping the object in his palms before getting a good look at it, a relieving grin broke out on his face. “Yes!” It was the arctic wolf baby tooth that Chris had kept as a souvenir.

He pulled out the arctic wolf power disk that he always kept in his pant’s bottom left pocket, and did not hesitate to activate the suit. It was a tad warm for the extra thick fur the suit provided, but the endurance and quick instincts of the arctic wolf would help give him the advantage he needed. Martin pulled out the grey disruptor disk once again. “Sorry Chris, this may hurt a little.” He looked around realizing he lost sight of the jaguar.

Chris stalked the lower branches of the trees, watching his prey with sharp eyes, before pouncing onto Martin’s back, letting out a visceral growl as he did so.

The arctic wolf yelped at the sudden weight, leaning forward to throw Chris off. Chris tumbled back a little before stopping himself by dragging his claws into the dirt. Martin wasted no time in charging forward, tackling the unsuspecting cat and attempting to pin him to the ground. “Hold still!”

Chris’ hind claws made purchase in Martin’s gut, kicking him over his head before Martin could reach the disk towards Chris’ chest. They had sparring matches in the creature power suits before. They loved to test the limits of creature powers and to match up animals that had no chance of meeting out in the wild, but those had been games. The way Chris’ claws swiped towards sensitive arteries aimed to *kill*. And Martin’s defense was just as desperate. A true dip into the wild instincts the suit provided that Martin never wanted to experience.

Despite the extra endurance of the suit, Martin was wearing himself out. It was too hot in the jungle that Chris could effortlessly navigate and disappear into. He needed a home advantage. Taking a quick glance around for any nearby creatures, he was distracted when Chris’ suit began to spark and fizzle causing him to stumble back with a pained yell.

“Chris?!” Martin ran up to his collapsed brother as the creature power suit malfunctioned. Chris grunted through the pain taking the advantage of Martin’s unguarded proximity, and tackled him once again. Grasping the front of Martin’s torso with his foreclaws, he sunk his teeth into Martin’s shoulder.

The older Kratt let out a yelp of pain but attempted to use the opportunity to insert the power disk into Chris’ suit. He struggled against the jaguar, to reach the center of his chest when Martin felt Chris’ hindclaws dig into the sensitive sides of his abdomen.

In a brief moment of terror, Martin recalled the defensive style of large cats.

Grab with the foreclaws.

The last thing Martin heard before his vision blacked out from an intense feeling of agony was Aviva screaming out his name.

Rake with the hindclaws.

Notes:

I have a habit for ending chapters right when something bad happens... anyways see you all next Saturday!

Chapter 6 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/136361791>)

Notes:

Quick trigger warning for this chapter! There is a brief moment of suicidal thoughts brought on by intense guilt. It's like one line and immediately shot down but I figured I would put a small warning here just in case!

I don't actually really like this chapter... I was really sick and was on so many (prescribed) drugs when I first wrote it so it was very... unintelligible lol. I've since rewritten it but it's still not my favorite thing. It's kinda necessary to set up for the next few chapters though so I wasn't really sure what else to do with it besides post it.

It's kinda short but I hope you enjoy it regardless!

Anyways thanks so much again for all the comments and kudos. I really appreciate the support! <3

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_6_endnotes\)](#)..)

Flashes of blood and claws and screams plagued Chris' dreams until he inevitably awoke drenched in a layer of sweat. He gasped, shaking on the uncomfortable cot in his cell for a few minutes, grabbing his chest with one hand to keep his heart from beating right out from under the skin. He laid still for a moment, trying to gather his scattered thoughts and memories as they slipped through the cracks of his hands like water.

He calmed down as he recalled his last clear memories. The tigers, the client meeting, Martin...

He froze again as his recollection halted. Martin... Martin was there.

Was that a dream?

No, Chris remembered clearly how he turned around at a sudden shout of the guards, how his eyes met with the pale blue's of his brother. He remembered the *terror* that hit him like a tsunami, because Martin was supposed to stay away. Because as long as they stayed away they would be safe from *him*.

What happened to Martin?!

There were guns, he had been on the floor, face stinging from Diego's hand. Then... nothing. *Oh God where was Martin.*

Chris scrambled out of his cot, making an attempt for the door but ended up on the ground as his legs gave out from underneath him. "Fuck!" He cursed as tears of frustration unwillingly gathered in the corner of his eyes. Now was not the time for this. His panicked mind did little to persuade his exhausted body. The suit had been taking more of a toll on him every time it was activated, He was too weak.

He coughed roughly as his body began to reject the movement, but Chris ignored it and desperately crawled towards the door. He had to find out what happened to Martin. He only made it a few pitiful inches before his muscles seized and left him shaking in pain.

This is the state Diego found him in as he opened the door to his cell, carrying a metal tray. Chris growled as he looked up, making defiant eye contact, though he felt mostly embarrassed that Diego caught him in such a vulnerable position.

The man with the gold mask stared amusingly for a moment before crouching down, dropping the metal tray a few inches away from Chris' face. The plate on it clattered a bit and Chris caught sight of the bland food that rested on it. Despite the fact he couldn't be certain the last time he'd eaten, Immediately his stomach dropped.

Diego made it clear early on that food was a luxury only earned by obedience. And for the most part, Chris was okay with that. He would rather starve to death than rely on Diego to feed him every day like a house cat. But having it brought to him now only meant that Chris accomplished something worthy of being fed. And considering Chris had pretty much attacked Diego in his most recent memory, it had to be something big.

Diego grinned further as the gears turned in Chris' head, staring at the plate of meat and stale bread.

“What happened?” The younger Kratt’s voice cracked. He rarely ever asked for clarification when awoken from the creature power suit being used. Most of the time he preferred to not know what he had done. Sometimes Diego would taunt him with retelling his actions, other times he would give hints, letting Chris’ imagination do the rest. However, this time, he needed to know.

“Let’s just say we won’t be needing that tracker of yours anymore,” Diego chuckled as he stood up once more, slamming the cell door shut and leaving Chris in the darkness of the empty room.

The tears finally spilled past, sliding down his cheeks as Chris clenched his hands into fists. Using the last of his energy, he slung the tray of food at the wall, letting out a scream as he did so. Collapsing back to the ground, sobs tore through his chest and he gripped his hair, wishing he could just melt into the floor, never to be seen again.

The next time he awoke, it was to the sound of the creature power suit shutting down and he was collapsing onto a cold grey floor. He couldn’t muster the strength to try and piece together the broken memories that would explain his situation. For the moment he would just drown in the confusion of the chaos he seemed to be dumped in.

The world was muffled around him as people seemed to be rushing about. Chris tried to peel himself off the floor to get a glimpse of his surroundings when the floor rocked, causing him to slip back down. He couldn’t fight back when a pair of hands grabbed his shoulders and hefted him into a sitting position, but at least appreciated finally being able to see his surroundings. Chris recognized the loading docks of Diego’s plane. The large door was still in the process of shutting but the plane was already in the air. There were guards running around, trying to secure cargo and vehicles. *Did something happen?*

Chris furrowed his brow trying to think back. The action brought a wince of pain from the left side of his face. Finally the cargo door locked into place. The usually deafening clanking of metal didn’t come and it was strangely silent.

Amidst his labored breathing, a blurry figure obstructed his view of the door. The reflections on his golden face forced Chris to look away, but a hand roughly grabbed his chin, pulling him back. His head was tilted so the figure had a better view of his left side. Chris cringed at the spike of pain, but the hand kept him still.

“Not on my watch, Kratt.” The shiny faced man’s voice sounded like he was across the room. “You still have use to me.”

Before Chris could question what he meant, the shiny man addressed someone Chris could not see. “Take him to the med bay.”

The younger Kratt felt someone’s arms snake under his knees and along his back, before he was hefted up into the air. He passed out again before they reached their destination.

His dreams were strange, he felt himself wading in and out of a state of awareness. He was prowling through a heavily wooded area. He climbed trees and crossed rivers. He was out there for a long time. The scene looked peaceful, something he enjoyed spending his days doing, but his gut instincts suggested otherwise. This was not a hike. He was here for a reason. He was in danger.

That danger presented itself as a man, and then another, and suddenly a dozen. And then they were chasing him and Chris wanted to run. He begged and pleaded but his feet (paws?) would not move. He had to fight. A less logical but more demanding voice ordered him to fight. So he pounced.

A pierce of gunfire jolted Chris up out of a laying position. When he frantically looked around the room to find it empty, he only slightly relaxed. There were no woods, and there were no gunmen.

But there had been...

Chris’ hand flew to the side of his head, coming in contact with a thick cloth material. Exploring it with his fingers, Chris found a large patch was pressed against his left temple, and a strip of gauze held it in place by binding around his head.

A voice from his right had Chris jumping out of his skin. “A couple of centimeters off and I would’ve been in the market for a new bodyguard.”

Chris whirled his head to the side, eyeing Diego in a door he did not hear open. “You’re pretty lucky.”

Chris didn’t *feel* very lucky. He tried to ignore the concern in Diego’s words. He knew Diego wasn’t here to express sympathy. He was here to taunt his captive, and to remind Chris that he was Diego’s property. If Diego wanted him to live, then he would live, and if he wanted him to die, he would die. He had no control of his fate.

When Chris gave no response, Diego lost interest and left him to his own devices once again. Diego seemed to be more comfortable in his control than ever, not even sending a guard in to keep watch over him.

A bitter sense of anger settled in Chris’ chest and he latched onto it, knowing if he didn’t, grief would consume him. His thoughts strayed back to his brother. *The brother he killed.* He wondered if Martin fought back, if he begged him for mercy, before forcefully expelling the thoughts.

A dark voice that he refused to acknowledge whispered he would be better off if the bullet hadn’t missed.

His more sensible side took reign of his thoughts once more before he could dive too far down *that* path. He couldn't think like that or else he wouldn't be able to stop Diego. It was the least he owed to Martin and the rest of the team. He knew he could never be forgiven. Chris knew that he was a monster, and everyone else knew it now too. So, he would at least take care of Diego so they wouldn't have to get their hands messy. His were already stained, so it only made sense.

Instead he got back on his feet, despite the raging migraine and the ringing in his left ear. A new resolve beyond just escaping driving him forward; he would ensure Diego met his downfall, no matter the cost.

Martin groaned, slightly aware that he was lying on a soft surface. He had a strange feeling, like he had been interrupted from something important. But the more he tried to recall what it was, the more his mind felt like it was swimming through a thick substance.

"Martin?" A familiar voice pulled him from his floating feeling and he strained with the effort of opening his eyes. "It's okay MK, you're alright."

"Koki?" He made out the voice of his fox-loving friend. He was able to make out the blurry form of Koki standing above him, the ceiling was white and littered with painfully bright lights. "Wha' happened?"

Despite Koki's insistence to go back to sleep, he fought her hands and attempted to sit up, wincing as a sharp pain trailed down his abdomen. "Damn it, Martin." Instead of fighting him more, Koki opted to helping him sit up in a way to avoid hurting himself.

Martin took a look around, recognizing the sterile room of the *Tortuga's* med-bay by the medical equipment that littered his bedside. He winced again as his last memories returned to him, the way Chris had dug into his flesh, Aviva's frightened scream.

"Aviva!" Martin met Koki's eyes in alarm.

Before he could even form a proper question, Koki stroked his arm with a soothing hand. "She's okay, just getting some rest. It took her a while to patch you all up."

Martin looked down at his bare chest, that was mostly covered in a thick layer of gauze. He could feel the tightened skin from the stitches, though it was numbed. "And... Chris?" Martin hesitantly asked.

The communications specialist gave a look of sympathy. "We'll get him back, Martin."

Martin let out a disappointing huff of air, falling back onto the pillows, his face scrunched with emotion. He blamed the tears building up in the corner of his eyes on the drugs. "I was so close, Koki." His voice cracked as he whispered.

"I know, hun." Koki continued to rub his arm, the only comfort she could give him. "It's gonna be okay. We'll get another chance." Seeing the drugs take over once more, as Martin slipped back into unconsciousness, she planted a small kiss on his forehead.

The call from Aviva would be burned into Koki's memory for as long as she lived. Jimmy had thankfully made it just in time, as Aviva had wrestled Chris off of a limp arctic wolf in a fizzling creature power suit. Before Chris could retaliate, Jimmy landed the *Tortuga*, scaring the jaguar back into the trees. He didn't have the chance to attack again as the team had quickly loaded up Martin before taking to the skies.

There had been so much blood. Aviva had slammed her fist on the deactivation button, before barking orders for medical supplies. Koki remembered holding a towel to the older Kratt's abdomen as Aviva poured alcohol haphazardly onto his wounds, enlisting a cry of pain from the half conscious man.

Jimmy, not usually able to stomach such sights, did his best to help by fetching Aviva any equipment she needed. Koki also noticed someone had cleaned up the floors while she and Aviva stitched up the splits in Martin's skin. She made a note to check on him later, knowing Jimmy didn't process crisis well.

The sliding door to the med bay wooshing as it opened interrupted her musings.

"I'll take over; I need to change his bandages again." Aviva stretched as she entered, having changed into a fresh set of clothes. "Why don't you go get some rest, Koki?"

Koki frowned as Aviva sidestepped her, avoiding eye contact. Always straight to business with Aviva. "You sure you're feeling okay? You were only gone for a couple hours."

Aviva shrugged, continuing to rummage through the cabinet even though Koki was certain Aviva knew exactly where the bandages were. "Couldn't really sleep anyways. I figured I may as well be productive instead of staring at a ceiling."

When Aviva finally grabbed the roll of gauze and turned around, Koki was standing behind her and halted her by grabbing onto Aviva's hands. "You spent two hours stitching up your best friend, Vivs. I'd say that's pretty productive."

“Not productive enough,” Aviva’s sharp tone finally gave Koki an insight to where her mind might be. She immediately corrected her expression to one of calmness before meeting Koki’s eyes.

But it was too late, as Koki shook her head and guided Aviva over to one of the empty cots and had her sit down on it. “Aviva, this isn’t your fault.”

“Not my fault?!” The inventor’s head snapped up. “Koki, none of this would be happening if it weren’t for me and my stupid ego!”

“What? Aviva!” Koki tried to calm her down but once the lid was cracked it all seemed to spill out.

“I knew Zach could hack into the creature power suits! He’s done it before!” Aviva shot up from the cot and began to pace around the room. “I should have updated the suits with a defense for it, but I didn’t! I thought the fact I was *smarter* than Zach was enough!”

The anger seemed to seep out of her and Aviva’s shoulders hunched in defeat. With glossy eyes she turned back towards Koki in shame. “I let it get to my head, and I figured because he couldn’t do it the first time, my technology was just too advanced to worry about him. I left the suits vulnerable, and now Chris is in danger because of it.”

“Hey.” Koki caught her attention again as she grabbed both Aviva’s hands, stroking them softly with her thumbs. “You would never do anything to hurt us. The brothers know that and so do I.”

“Diego and Zach kidnapped Chris, they stole your technology, and corrupted it beyond recognition. That suit out there is *not* pure Aviva,” Koki reassured. The inventor looked down, unconvinced. Koki gently nudged her chin up to meet her eyes once more. “Even if you did put a stronger firewall in the suits, Zach would’ve done anything to get his way. And if they couldn’t reprogram the suits, what do you think they would’ve done to Chris?”

Aviva saw the crime scenes of people Diego no longer saw to be useful. She didn’t think she would ever be able to forget. She shakily nodded, trying to keep the mental image of Chris in that position out of her head.

“Chris is still alive.” Koki brought her hands onto Aviva’s shoulders and gave them a reassuring squeeze. “Which means we can still get him back.”

Aviva’s nod was more confident, and her stare hardened into one of determination. “I’m going to fix this. No one will ever use my tech like this again, I swear.”

“I believe you, honey,” Koki smiled. “That gorgeous brain of yours will make it happen.”

In the days that followed, the *Tortuga* crew did their best to lick their wounds and recover. Martin’s creature power suit was damaged slightly, and Aviva had been hesitant to fix it, knowing the moment she deemed it ready to be used again Martin would be jumping at the chance to go back out. So instead she focused most of her energy on small updates to the *Tortuga*, just needing *something* to do while they waited for him to recover.

Martin was never known for his patience, but with the urgency of his brother making it worse, he was almost insufferable to be around. Banned from any strenuous activity, he was constantly hovering over someone, asking too many questions about what they were doing in an attempt to distract himself.

“Aviva-”

She grimaced as Martin had targeted her, probably having been just kicked out of the cockpit by Jimmy. “Your stitches aren’t coming out for another two days, Martin.” She answered the first question he would always ask her before he even had a chance to ask it.

He didn’t respond, instead just sitting down in one of the chairs next to her as Aviva typed away on the main console. She sighed, suddenly feeling guilty at her sharp words. They were all on edge, but it wasn’t an excuse to take it out on each other. “Sorry, MK. I’m just a little busy working on this new update.”

“It’s okay,” his quiet voice brought a new level of concern to Aviva. “I wasn’t trying to ask about the stitches.”

She swiveled her chair towards the older Kratt, noting the way his shoulders slumped and his brow was hitched in deep thought. “What’s up?” She tried to ask nonchalantly. It wasn’t hard to imagine what Martin was currently thinking about. The absence of Chris had hung heavily in the air, even more so in the past few days. No one had been too willing to discuss it. Not in front of Martin at least.

They never doubted Martin’s faith in his brother. They knew he would never blame Chris for the scars that would certainly remain on his torso. But they acknowledged it was a sensitive subject; one that needed time to heal with the wounds themselves.

“Do you think...” Martin started fiddling with the hems of his sleeves. “When this is all over, Chris is gonna be... okay?”

Aviva swallowed, not sure how to answer at first. Of course Martin would be more concerned over Chris’ wellbeing than his own. Despite the fact that Martin was currently being held together by stitches and gauze, it was just in his nature.

“I mean, of course he’s going to be okay,” Martin continued. “I’ll make sure of it. But I mean... is he going to be *okay* with everything.”

Aviva noticed the way he clenched a hand over his gut. "I think... that no matter what happens, he's going to have a great support system."

Martin looked at her with an unreadable expression, catching on that she didn't necessarily answer his question. Before she could further reassure him, the console started beeping urgently, catching their attention.

"What the?-" Aviva brought up the notification that her new update had found some foreign hardware in the mainframe. She singled out the code, scanning it over. She gasped as she recognized the spybot technology. *Zach's* spybot technology.

"What is that?" Martin curiously glanced over her shoulders, previous conversation being forgotten.

She smiled typing out a program that would track the transmission address of the spybot.

"Our way to Chris."

Notes:

This is literally just the chapter of everyone taking a second to be like "yo that was crazy"
Next week will be more exciting I promise.

Chapter 7 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/136813315>)

Notes:

It's here, It's here!

this chapter was a joy to write, probably my favorite out of this whole work so far.

Thanks so much for reading so far, I hope you enjoy! Kudos and Comments are always much appreciated. <3

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_7_endnotes\)](#).)

In the next several days, the Tortuga crew was bustling with energy. Martin, having finally removed his stitches was overjoyed to find his creature power suit finally repaired. With a newfound sense of confidence, he took back his position of leadership with a fire in his eyes that had been painfully missing.

When Aviva had found that spybot hidden in the Tortuga's database, it was like a switch had flipped and hope returned to the entire crew.

"Enough of this cat and mouse," Aviva announced showing the live coordinates of Diego's cargo plane. "We're bringing this right to Diego's doorstep."

She was able to salvage the disruptor power disk which remained their first resort to taking Chris out of commission. However, she also whipped up a few stun guns as a failsafe. Martin had eyed them with a disapproving glare before Aviva reminded him of the still-healing claw marks under his shirt.

While rescuing Chris was the priority, taking down Diego's operation and relocating any animals in his possession was also taken into consideration. Koki had already gathered plenty of evidence against Diego and many of his customers, and was prepared to hand it over to the nearest authority of wherever they ended up catching him.

Judging by the direction he was heading on the map, it would be South Africa. The team didn't have time to consider the irony of catching Diego in the same continent they had met him in.

The Tortuga blazed through the skies, as the crew prepared for their arrival. "These are still in development, so I don't want us to use them unless absolutely necessary." Aviva surprised the crew by pulling out two additional creature power suits, clad in orange and purple.

Koki gasped, reaching out for the orange suit and holding it up to get a better look at it. "Aviva, are these what I think they are?"

"It was going to be a surprise, but I figured we may need them," Aviva smiled at the starstruck look in Koki's eyes. "The activations aren't quite stable yet, so they only last a few minutes."

"We could use every advantage we can get," Martin settled a thankful hand on her shoulder. "You're awesome, Aviva!"

"Coming up on the set coordinates." Jimmy's voice interrupted from the intercom. "Entering stealth mode now."

The *Tortuga* soon found itself matching the speed of a dark cargo plane that was leisurely making its way through the sky. Jimmy brought the ship as close as he dared without setting off any proximity alarms before opening the garage door.

Aviva, Koki, and Martin stood ready, all adorned with their creature power suits. Martin made the jump first onto the back of the cargo plane, the girls following quickly behind him. Before the garage door shut once more, leaving the Tortuga completely invisible, it could be seen pulling away slightly, but still following close.

Aviva activated her M.I.K. buzzsaw, drilling a hole into the ship's exterior before diving inside. They soon found themselves in an eerily empty hallway.

Koki brought up the schematics for the ship, which they had gotten from Zach, on her creature pod and pointed down the hallway. "The cockpit should be in that direction."

They stealthily made their way through the winding hallways, ducking into small closets or corners when footsteps of an approaching lackey rang out. When they finally reached the main console of the plane, they froze as the group walked in on a pair of guards too busy chatting to watch the security cameras.

The sliding door caught their attention and they both froze. "Hey, who are you?!"

Martin wasted no time in swiftly punching one in the face while Aviva shot the other with her stun gun.

"Damn," Koki blinked looking down at the bruise that was already forming on the lackey's face. "Nice hit, MK."

Martin flushed at the open display of aggression while Koki walked past them to fiddle with the console. She quickly sifted through the security cameras, catching sight of a golden mask. The communications specialist brought up the feed, angling the camera for a better view of the room. "He's in the loading dock." He seemed to be supervising as a couple guards took stock of their current selection of animals.

"What about Chris?" Martin hovered as Koki shifted her focus.

As a camera caught sight of the brunette, standing only a few feet behind Diego, she stopped in confusion. "He's... also in the loading dock?"

She switched to another camera to get a better angle. They watched Chris as his chest heaved in strain. He was standing rigidly, eyes targeted on Diego's back in unhinged calculation. Martin noticed the thick bandage taped to the left side of his forehead that was not present last time. Chris was clenching something behind his back, but it was too small to see from the camera.

"What's he doing?" Aviva cocked her head at the scene.

"I don't know, but we need to get down there, now." Martin's face twisted in determination. The two girls nodded, exiting the cockpit, but not before setting a loop on the camera feed to keep any other guards off their trail.

Murder wasn't something Chris would ever think he could be complicit in, much less premeditated. So when he found his chest tightening with anxiety as he gripped his makeshift blade, he silently began to curse himself.

He wasn't entitled to this fear. More than enough blood had been spilled by his own hands; he wasn't allowed to be cowardice about it now. Especially not when the result would mean freedom from the person who had kidnapped and tortured him for months, and an end to another branch of wildlife poachers.

While escorting Diego through his daily tasks, Chris caught sight of a box of spare Zachbot parts. Sliding a thin sheet of metal up his sleeve as he passed, the younger Kratt recalled just how fast his heart rate spiked at the possibility of being caught with such a material. He tried not to let the anxiety show on his face, but Diego had eyed him strangely throughout the day.

He played it off as another migraine, which technically wasn't a lie. They were starting to get rather bothersome as his vision would white-out occasionally. He just prayed Diego wouldn't find reason to activate the suit, less he find the smuggled metal.

Chris' prayers were answered as Diego had a guard escort him back to his cell. Locked away in the confined room once more, Chris would usually use this opportunity to get as much rest as possible, even though it never seemed like enough. However, this time he was quick to slide the metal out of his sleeve and start grinding it against the steel frame of his cot. He cringed at the scratching of metal grating against each other, and waited to see if someone would come check on the noise.

When it seemed that either nobody heard or cared enough to look into the source, he got to work filing down one of the sides into a jagged point. When Diego had called for his services again, Chris slid the blade back into his sleeve and tried to calm his building anxiety.

Diego was taking stock of his current product, preparing for an auction. As always, Diego demanded Chris be present to these outings, should anything go arise. Usually Diego would have the suit activated for the entirety of the event, but for now he mostly ignored Chris who was quietly standing to the side.

"Finally beat some respect into him?" One of the guards laughed at Chris' patient stance.

Chris felt himself akin to a eyelash palm pitviper, as he silently waited motionless for what felt like hours. His eyes were trained on Diego's back, sliding the blade from its hiding place. Most of the guards in the room became bored with the repetitive task of checking over each animal, and setting a baseline price based on their features and condition. Heads would occasionally flick in Chris' direction, but most of the room seemed to forget his presence.

Chris could feel his heartbeat against his ribcage. There were no second chances. If he failed now, Diego probably wouldn't risk deactivating the suit ever again. If Chris survived the punishment that is. Success was the only way Chris could atone for everything he'd done. He owed it to the people he's hurt, to the animals he's placed in the wrong hands, and to his brother. It was the only way to make things right.

Chris cleared every tangled thought from his mind. He took a deep breath, and then he moved.

Following the schematics to the loading dock in the belly of the plane, and taking out any guards they ran into with the stun guns, Martin, Aviva, and Koki found themselves crouching on the platform that overlooked the large bay.

Getting a better glimpse of what the metal crates contained, Martin spotted an African honey badger, bringing a smile to his face. Prematurely sliding the disk into his suit, he handed off the disruptor to Koki. "I'll distract Diego. Get this to Chris."

The pair nodded, ready to spring from their hiding spots when a yell broke through the hangar. To everyone's surprise, Chris had leaped straight onto Diego's back where he dug a mangled piece of metal into the side of the man's neck.

Diego let out a viscous yell as he grabbed for the weight that clung to his back. The guards stumbled over themselves to grab at their guns, but held fire as Chris was unintentionally using Diego as a shield.

Abandoning any previous plan, Martin didn't hesitate in dropping from the platform and charging towards the scuffle, swiping a touch from the badger as he did so.

"YOU WORTHLESS RAT!" Diego finally grabbed onto Chris' sleeve, slamming him down on the ground, taking the makeshift blade with him. Now that the weapon was removed, a steady flow of blood began to leak from the deep yet not fatal gash in Diego's neck. Though it didn't seem to phase him much. "You'll fucking pay for that!"

Martin slammed the activation button of his suit before pouncing onto Diego's shoulders, causing even more surprise and confusion from the guards. Koki and Aviva weren't far behind him, using their stun guns to take out the guards.

"Martin?!" Chris felt like his stomach had been ripped into his throat at the sight of the blue honey badger. A terrifying assumption that he was now also experiencing hallucinations crossed his mind. *Was this real?*

Diego also managed to rip the clawing and snarling Kratt from his back, yelling in fury as he did so. "How many times do I have to kill you before you stay dead?!" Diego pulled a handgun from his belt, and cocked it. "If you want something done, do it yourself, I suppose."

Hallucination or not, Chris' instincts screamed at him to react. He struggled to his feet, gripping Diego's forearm to keep him from aiming the gun. Diego elbowed his ribs, sending the weakened Kratt back into a pile of cargo boxes. When he turned his focus back to Martin, the honey badger was already on top of him, clawing through his shirt and leaving angry shallow lines on his torso.

Diego reactively fired the pistol into the air, before shoving Martin off, aiming the gun in his direction.

A flash of purple light distracted Diego enough to turn his head towards a charging purple rhino. "What the f-"

Aviva crashed into him, using her horn to propel Diego into the wall, leaving a small dent in his wake. "That's pure Aviva power, baby!"

Diego growled, his mask tilted slightly, revealing piercing eyes of rage. He brought his hand up, slamming it down onto the nearby console, which began to open the large ramp door.

The sudden suction of the wind current had swept Aviva off her feet as her unstable power suit fizzled out and deactivated. She yelped as the lack of weight that the rhino suit brought had her pulled towards the open door of the plane.

"I got you, honey!" Koki shouted as she touched an armadillo, activating the suit, and reaching out with the extended tongue. She grasped hold of Aviva's ankle and held tight to one of the steps railing.

With his backup distracted, Diego turned his attention to Martin once more. "You'll regret ever stepping foot on this plane, Kratt." He grasped a crowbar that had been propped up against the wall and charged.

Martin met him head on, grabbing the crowbar mid-swing and fighting back the force of it. "You'll regret ever touching my brother," he spat, snarling in Diego's face.

With Diego and Martin engaged, Chris made his way to unsteady feet once more. He was still clutching the piece of bloodied metal. Now with an intense drive to protect his *very much alive* brother, Chris dove into the fray, slicing the burly man's back, which caused him to lose the battle of strengths he was currently having with Martin.

He stumbled backwards into Chris, grabbing the younger Kratt by the front of his chest as he did so. Repurposing his momentum, Diego threw Chris into his older brother, causing both of the Kratts to tumble to the ground.

"It's about time you made yourself useful, gatito," Diego's tone turned dark as he brought his watch up once more.

Martin and Chris shared a terrified glance, as they sat frozen on the ground. Time seemed to halt as their eyes met, knowing exactly what was about to happen. While Martin's expression remained scared, not sure what to do to stop it, Chris' hardened in determination.

He wouldn't let Diego use him anymore.

Chris' hand clenched around the jagged piece of metal in his hands, bringing it up and swiftly stabbing it into the center console of the power suit just as Diego's finger met the activation button.

Martin's expression morphed into one of horror as the suit lit up with electricity, sending Chris to the ground with tremors. Martin scrambled over to cradle his thrashing brother, getting a small shock from the suit himself.

Despite the crackling of electricity, the suit flashed a brilliant green and engulfed Chris in the light. Martin felt himself get shoved aside in the process, and when the light faded, a thrashing green and red lion was left in its wake.

The suit continued to spark with electricity, though it didn't seem to affect Chris as much as he stumbled back to his feet.

"I want you to rip him to shreds." Diego snarled, pointing at Martin who was quickly scrambling back.

Chris reacted instantly, leaping towards Martin with claws outstretched. The badger was able to roll out of the way before Chris left deep gashes in the metal floor. Martin finally made it to his feet before Chris met him head on; their hands met, pushing against each other. Martin glanced around the room in a panic. The honey badger suit was definitely strong, but the sheer power of a lion would overtake him in a head-on collision. His eyes met Chris' finding them strangely focused yet far away at the same time. They lacked the same fire that Chris had when he was determined about something. Yet they weren't quite the same from his encounter in the jungle either. There was a spark of life in them.

"Chris you need to fight it." Martin felt himself get pushed back a few inches as he feet dragged on the ground. "I know you don't wanna do this!"

Chris' suit glitched once more and for just a moment his eyes widened in recognition. A moment was all Martin needed to push back, freeing him from Chris' grasp.

"MK!" Koki called, she had successfully reeled back Aviva and deactivated. The communications specialist held up the gray disk that was entrusted to her before tossing it like a frisbee in the badger's direction.

"NO!" Diego let out an enraged scream as he dived for his fallen firearm and began to open fire at the girls before Aviva pulled Koki back behind some metal crates as cover.

Martin dived for the disk, using his momentum to charge at Diego and tackle him to the ground, knocking the gun out of his hands once more. Martin connected a fist to the side of Diego's face, his golden mask clattering as it rolled across the floor. Before Martin could get a glimpse of his uncovered skin, a pair of claws grabbed his collar and flung him across the room.

Turning mid-air, Martin slowed himself by dragging his claws along the floor, enlisting a skin-crawling screeching sound as he did so. He looked up to find Chris heaving with strain as he stared him down. He could see the lion's fingers twitching slightly from the way the suit would buzz every so often.

The suit was too unstable, he was clearly in pain. But with Diego in control, that wouldn't stop him. However, Chris' flash of recognition filled Martin with hope. The suit was damaged, which meant so was Diego's influence.

Martin could deactivate the suit, he just needed a little help from his brother.

So, when Chris broke from his trance and charged with a roar once more, Martin couldn't help the smile that crossed his face. When Chris got close enough, Martin flipped over his brother, landing on his back and wrapping his arms around his neck.

"Come on, Chris! I know you're in there!" Martin tightened his hold as the Lion began thrashing in attempt to dislodge him. "I don't wanna hurt you, but I need you to work with me!"

Chris finally grabbed hold of Martin, throwing him over his shoulders onto the ground and pinning him there.

Martin let out a grunt as his head knocked harshly against the metal flooring; large claws digging into his shoulders holding him in place. "Chris, listen! I'm so sorry!"

The lion continued to growl but seemed to be frozen at Martin's proclamation. So, he continued. "I'm supposed to have your back; supposed to protect you!" Martin stopped struggling against the hold and instead looked into Chris' eyes with a pleading expression. In a sign of submission, he slowly reached up and deactivated his honey badger suit. "But I didn't. And I know you're hurting."

Chris' expression twitched and his chest continued to draw with strained breath. He made no move to hurt Martin, despite the instincts screaming at him to take this chance of vulnerability. He felt confused. He should be listening to the suit, there would be great punishment if he didn't. He was in danger. But despite everything, Chris couldn't bring himself to move. He didn't *want* to move.

"No matter what's happened, or what Diego made you do..." Martin held the gray deactivation disk delicately in his fingers, taking the chance to slowly reach towards Chris' chest. "You're still my little brother, and I love you." He slid the

disk into the paw print.

Chris instantly stumbled back, letting out a guttural roar as the suit lit up once more. He clawed at his face as the suit glitched and the transformation began to fall apart. Martin swallowed in fear as the suit was forcibly shut down, leaving the shaking form of his brother in the aftermath.

Chris met Martin's eyes in exhausted relief before losing his balance and falling forward. Martin jumped to his feet, running over to catch his brother by the shoulders before he met the ground. Martin could feel tears of joy fill the corners of his eyes as he held the weight of his brother. He noted how Chris was far too light but was too relieved by the sight of his steadily rising chest to be overly worried about it.

It was finally over. Chris was coming home.

"NO!" A furious scream took Martin by surprise. In a last ditch effort, Diego let his rage overcome him and ran for the brothers. He shoved Martin with the side of his shoulder and grasped hold of Chris, backing them both towards the edge of the open door.

"Chris!" Martin outstretched a hand but held his ground, fearful of what Diego would do should he come closer.

"Hold it, Diego!" Koki called. She and Aviva held their stun guns at a steady aim towards his chest.

A maniacal laugh escaped Diego's throat, his face, revealing a nose and eye mangled by thick scars, twisted in an inhuman way. His normally slicked and combed hair was greased with sweat and jutting out in numerous directions. Paired with the open wound on the side of his neck and his shredded button-down coated in blood, he was the perfect illustration of a man with nothing left to lose. His eyes were unhinged as he inched closer to the open skies with a half-conscious Kratt tight between his arms. "Go ahead! Shoot me!"

"We can still settle this Diego," Aviva reasoned. "Let go of Chris and we'll turn you in. No one has to die here."

Martin watched from where he crouched with calculated eyes. Diego's muscles tensed and that's when Martin knew, Diego had no intentions of leaving his plane empty handed.

"If you want to take down my operation... It's only fair the most crucial piece comes with it." Diego began taking a step out into the open air.

Martin pounced forward, grasping into his brothers shoulders while simultaneously kicking back Diego, peeling Chris from his grasp.

He and Chris were sent tumbling back into the plane as Diego lost his footing, falling back into the open sky with a yell.

Everyone sat completely silent for a moment, the rushing air had consumed Diego's scream as soon as he had left eyesight, leaving the loading dock eerily void of sound aside from the wind.

Aviva was the first to move as she sheathed her stun gun and brought out her creature pod. "Jimmy, we're taking the plane down."

Koki jogged over to Martin who was cradling Chris to his chest as he stared out into the bright sky. "Martin?"

"Y-yeah, I'm okay." His shock seemed to wear off as he shook his head, bringing himself back into the moment.

"Let's get out of here."

With Diego gone, it was child's play to clear the rest of the plane. The remaining goons, tied in the cargo hold, were waiting for the authorities to rendezvous at the coordinates where Koki landed the vehicle.

The sun was starting to set when sirens pierced through the air and police vehicles parked themselves at the foot of the cargo plane's ramp. The beating propeller of a helicopter joined the symphony soon after, a blinding spotlight keeping the area well lit.

Police chatter filled the silence rather quickly as they began taking statements and loading Diego's crew into several trucks. The captured animals were getting panicked at all the flashing lights and people, adding their cries to the sensory nightmare. Several ambulances had joined the emergency responders as well, loading the unconscious Kratt onto a stretcher. Martin had shrugged off their treatment for now, opting to stay by his brothers side as they began taking his vitals.

When they deemed him stable enough to be transported, EMTs hefted the stretcher back into the ambulance. Martin began looking around at the mess of authorities and detained animals, anxiety building in his chest. As the team lead, it was technically his responsibility to give the official statement and offer partnership to the local wildlife services to re-home the animals. He wasn't sure if he could get his head straight enough at the moment to even write his name on the paperwork.

A warm hand settling on his back snapped Martin back to reality as Aviva smiled reassuringly at him. "Go with Chris. The rest of us will stay and get this sorted out." Martin glanced over to find Jimmy and Koki working diligently with the police to unload the animals from the cargo hold.

Martin surprised the inventor by bringing her into a tight hug. "Thank you, Aviva..." Her never-ending support had almost brought tears to his eyes once more. He owed the team more than just his life at this point. Yet, he knew none of them would ever ask for anything in return.

Martin climbed into the back of the ambulance as it peeled out of the runway Koki had landed Diego's plane on. He allowed the worry of the situation behind him to flow out of his mind and focus directly on his unconscious brother in front of him.

Chris was safe. The monitor that showed the constant beat of his heart proved so. And the dedicated EMTs who were setting up IVs and redressing the bandage on the side of Chris' face further evidenced he was in good hands.

But Martin would be lying to say it was all over. Because his hands were still shaking at the memory of Diego's final scream, and the burn marks on Chris' bare chest as they cut away the charred suit looked painful.

No, Diego had left his mark. A mark that may take a long time to fade.

Martin thought back to the promise he made to Chris in the plane.

"No matter what's happened, or what Diego made you do..."

In the end it doesn't matter how deep the mark is. They were going to get through this. Chris was strong. And with the God-sent team that they could consider family, Martin knew they were going to be okay.

Notes:

WOO that was long, but I think it was definitely worth it :)

RIP to Diego I guess... (just ignore the fact that every other "death" in this fic so far has been a fake-out.... will Diego survive? who knows? certainly not me!)

anyways no this is NOT the end. As Martin said, there's still a lot to address...

Chapter 8 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/137275516>)

Notes:

And so the recovery arc begins...

As always, thank you so much for all the kudos and comments <333

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_8_endnotes\)](#).)

"Chris, would you please just use the chair?" Martin gave an exasperated sigh. The same one he would use when they were kids and Chris refused to pass the ball on their shared soccer team.

"My legs aren't broken, Martin. I can walk to the Createrra." Despite his arguments, he could barely support himself on his shaky legs the day prior.

Waking up in that hospital bed had first felt like another dream. Some fantasy illusion that his brain manifested to cope with the fact he was going to die alone in a secluded plane, having slaughtered his closest family. The last thing he could remember was his makeshift blade digging into the flesh of his captor... and then nothing.

And then Martin was practically strangling him in an embrace and crying all over the bedsheets. He had always been the emotional one.

All Chris could bring himself to do was not fight against the hold. *Martin wasn't dead. Martin was alive.* Which also meant Chris had not killed him.

The younger Kratt wished he could say he cried in joy, or embraced his brother, or had done anything at all but sat in shock. His eyes were dry and he barely fought the urge to pull away any time Martin shifted too close.

Martin wasn't dead.

Doctors came and went, adjusting the needles that were inserted in his arms and checking on the numerous wounds he wasn't entirely sure how he received. They had all been kind to him, which felt unsettling. Didn't they know he was dangerous?

They would talk in hushed voices to Martin, and Chris cursed the ever-present ringing in his ear that prevented him from making out the words. Were they discussing his actions? Surely they all knew by now. Even if Martin was alive, Chris was certain the others couldn't have been so lucky.

His paranoia was silenced by morphine and he dozed off again. The next time his eyes opened, once again questioning the validity of what he was seeing, more familiar figures were surrounding him. Perhaps this was real after all. However, that just made his surroundings even more confusing. Did he succeed? Was Diego dead? Did that make him a murderer inside the suit and out?

In the chair that Martin had been sitting in, a certain red-head preoccupied, legs propped up and hat tilted down over his face. The steady rise and fall of Jimmy's chest confirmed he was out like a light.

Hearing the steady voice of his brother, Chris neglected to open his eyes when Martin spoke more prominently assuming Chris was still asleep. Would they finally admit to their disgust with him if he weren't awake to hear it?

"-Says we should be out of here in a couple of days. He was just extremely dehydrated, and deficient in pretty much everything," Martin gave an exhaustive sigh. "He also has a lot of muscle damage; he's at risk of Rhabdomyolysis, so they just want to keep an eye on him."

"Rhado-myso-what?" Chris heard Koki's familiar voice respond.

"Rhabdo, it's a condition body builders have to be cautious of," Aviva sounded off, "It's basically kidney or heart failure caused by muscles breaking down and releasing proteins in the bloodstream."

Chris could feel eyes tracing over him and it took everything not to squirm under their gaze.

"You always warned us about overusing the suit but..." Martin trailed off. His voice got quiet and scared. "His hair is turning *white*, Aviva. He's 21 years old."

"The human body can't sustain that amount of strain..." Aviva had always been known for her boldness, so when her voice shook in uncertainty, the weight of the situation came crashing down. "Under normal circumstances, you or Chris would have passed out from exhaustion before ever getting to this point. Diego's control over the suit was probably the only thing keeping him going."

The room was silent again and Chris started to regret his eaves-dropping. They sounded... *worried*. How could they not be angry with him? After everything he's done.

The only conclusion that made sense, and one that had Chris' stomach drop in fear, was that they simply didn't *know*. Which meant Chris would have to be the one to tell them.

He would have to watch as their faces turned from fondness to disgust, but it would be wrong to withhold that information. He was dangerous; they deserved to know.

But when a warm hand settled on his shoulder, causing him to shift and open his eyes to the warm smile of his brother, Chris almost couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Hey, bud." Martin looked exhausted, adding another layer of guilt upon Chris' heart. "Koki and Aviva are grabbing us lunch; nurses said you should try to eat something when you woke up."

A burning question slipped from Chris' tongue before he could stop it. "Where's Diego?" He regretted it instantly as Martin's smile slipped momentarily. Perhaps it was considered insensitive for the first words spoken to your brother in several months, but Chris couldn't handle dodging the conversation any longer. They were all in danger, there was no time for pleasantries.

"You don't need to be worried about that right now, Chris." Martin laughed, a tale-tell sign he was hiding something. "Just focus on resting up and-"

"Martin." Chris interrupted, his face set in a hardened gaze. "Where's Diego?" He wouldn't ever be able to rest until he knew.

Martin licked his dry lips and took a moment studying the pattern on the hospital sheets. When his eyes finally met Chris' again they were distraught, like he was trying to keep his composure. He always had a habit of trying to hide bad things from Chris, trying to carry the burden for the both of them. "He's gone. He can't hurt you anymore."

Chris studied Martin's face for a moment, acknowledging the inner turmoil his older brother was failing to hide. Of course Martin would have a hard time processing his little brother killed someone. Chris nodded in acceptance. He tried not to feel a little crushed that Martin was conflicted with his actions. A small piece of him had secretly hoped Martin would give some sort of approval or acknowledgement that Chris had no other choice. But Chris had murdered a man in cold blood. Why should Martin praise him for that?

They didn't say anything more to each other.

The girls had returned half an hour later with some spare clothes for Chris and wrapped sandwiches from the vending machine in the hall. Not feeling up for the hardness of a turkey sandwich, Chris was blessed with the hospital specialty: a jello cup.

Jimmy stirred from his nap to join them as they sat around and spurred a random discussion as if they weren't sitting in a hospital room. Chris didn't pay much attention to the conversation, but basked in the familiarity of it. It reminded him of evenings in the *Tortuga*, after a long day of creature adventuring, when they would sit around with bowls of Jimmy's cooking and just chat about anything their heart's desired.

Usually it would turn into a wow fact challenge between the brothers as they listed off random quirks of the animals they had been doing personal studies on, but each time Martin tried to spark a topic he knew his brother was interested in, Chris ignored it.

As he struggled down the red gelatin, which granted was probably more nutritious than whatever canned food Diego had thrown at him, Chris felt himself getting more and more uneasy.

This was supposed to be normal, but at the same time it felt so wrong.

Chris hated delaying the inevitable, and waiting for the other shoe to drop and for the team to acknowledge his stained hands was painful.

He was eventually helped over to the bathroom where he attempted to put on the sweatpants Aviva and Koki had brought back from his closet in the *Tortuga*. When they fell back down to his ankles the second he let go of the waistband, Chris took a second to actually look over his body.

He was aware that his figure was not quite the same as he remembered, but when he glanced into the mirror and met his reflection for the first time in weeks he felt frozen.

His hair really was turning white.

Streaks of white hair broke through his bangs, sticking out against his natural brunette like a sore thumb. Bringing a hand up to poke and prod at his face, Chris turned and gawked at himself from every angle he could manage. He felt like he was back in school studying bacteria under a microscope.

He had always been more lean than his brother, but he never remembered being quite this small. The way his elbows were sharper and protruded from his skin more made him self conscious. His chest was wrapped in gauze, but he could still feel the skin around his ribcage was tighter. He started pointing out scars that he couldn't quite trace the origin of, and the number only increased as he continued studying his body. His hands made their way back to his face and he started picking at the bandage covering his left temple.

Finally peeling it away, he was met with the half-healed gash of the bullet graze. The deepest part of the wound was stitched together, with the shallow ends already scabbed over. He noted how the split skin had grazed through the tip of his eyebrow and dug into his hairline by a few inches.

The longer Chris stared, the louder the ringing got until a sharp knock on the door broke his trance.

"Chris?" Martin called from the other end. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Chris answered as loud as he dared as he hastily pulled up his sweatpants once more and tied the string as tight as the elastic would allow him. He pulled the t-shirt over his head, wincing as the rapid movement caused his sore muscles to flare.

It must've shown on his face when he opened the door, because Martin immediately hooked an arm under his shoulders and assisted Chris in his waddle back to the bed. Chris gave a small thanks but refused to meet his eyes. He couldn't stand to see the pity, not when Martin knew what he'd done.

Chris recognized the room was eerily silent, and looked around to see it void of its previous inhabitants.

"The others went back to the *Tortuga*," Martin explained. "Only one guest can stay with a patient overnight; hospital policy."

While Chris was in the bathroom Martin had escorted the others out into the hallway as they prepared to head back to the ship that was parked a couple miles away.

"We'll be back in the morning, but we need to start tracking down the origins of those rescued animals as soon as possible." Aviva was sifting through some paperwork that she had been working on throughout the day. "Koki and I can take over for now, so try not to worry about it too much."

"Thanks, Aviva... again." Martin watched as Koki and Jimmy continued down the hallway to sign out at the desk. "I'm so sorry... I-"

"I just said not to worry about it, MK." Aviva punched him lightly in the arm. "Chris needs you more than we do right now."

She frowned when Martin awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not so sure about that." When Aviva turned her body towards him, Martin continued. "He can't even look me in the eyes." The guilt eating him alive had been momentarily suppressed through the chaos of rescuing Chris. But now that the dust was settled, it returned tenfold. He pretended not to notice the way Chris would flinch away from him, but the subtle body language only confirmed Martin's paranoia that he was at fault for his brother's predicament.

"Come on, Martin don't do this to yourself," She scolded.

"You saw him. He won't even speak to me," Martin rubbed his arms self consciously.

"He was barely awake today," Aviva reasoned. "He was with Diego for months; he's disoriented."

"I don't..." The older Kratt caught his breath, holding it for a few seconds before letting it out. "I don't know what to do."

"You're his brother," Aviva gave a comforting smile. "You'll figure it out. Just give him some time."

With that she was walking down the hallway to where the others were waiting with sympathetic waves.

With Martin and Chris alone again, the atmosphere turned tense. The younger of the pair laid back into the pillows, closing his eyes even though he knew he was too alert for sleep to take him.

Martin hovered awkwardly, pulling at his hands the way he does when he has something to say but doesn't quite know how to articulate it.

Finally the silence broke as the blue brother seated himself on the side of Chris' bed. "Chris, I don't expect you to tell me everything right away."

Chris sucked in a breath. At least the wait was over, it didn't stop the way his heart began to beat a little faster.

"I don't know everything that went on in that plane, and until you're ready to talk about it, I don't wanna know."

Martin's voice was shaky, like he was trying to stop himself from getting emotional. "But I meant everything I said to you back then."

Chris' brows furrowed as he tried to recall which conversation Martin was referring to. The last he saw Martin was just before he attacked him in South America. They didn't really have much time to talk, as guns being held to their faces was far more relevant.

Immediately Chris' mind began to work overtime, coming up with assumptions for what that conversation may have entailed. Had Martin already denounced kinship of him and Chris just couldn't remember it? Was Martin waiting for the others to leave to break the news that Chris was being sent back home? That they couldn't trust a murderer? That he deserved to rot in that plane? Was Martin just waiting for a confession to finalize his decision?

Chris' face must have shown his growing distressed because Martin's brows furrowed in concern and he scooted closer, stopping mid-motion when Chris flinched.

"I-I'm sorry." Chris' voice was thick with the most emotion he had shown since waking up. He looked down at his hands, taking calculated breaths. "You should just go."

"What?" Martin moved closer, slower this time and with his hands outstretched where Chris could see. "Chris, I'm not going anywhere."

...Until I get a straight answer, Chris' mind filled in the sentence.

"I had to do it, okay?" Chris swallowed before his eyes met Martin, trying to prepare himself for the disgust that he would find in them. "I couldn't let anyone else get hurt."

Martin's heart began to race as his confusion turned to panic at the instability in his brother's expression. "Had to do what?"

It was Chris' turn to look confused as he soaked in Martin's question. *Did he really not know?* "Kill Diego," He confessed with no hesitance.

Martin paused, his lack of reaction did little to calm Chris' rapid heart rate. His expression slowly morphed into realization with an underlay of something unreadable to Chris. Something almost like guilt?

"Chris..." Martin seemed to carefully select his words. "You didn't kill Diego."

"...What?"

"I did."

Chris sat for a moment dumbfounded, face scrunching as if Martin had just told him a bad joke. "What? No... I..." He held his hand into a fist as if he were holding an imaginary blade.

"You... don't remember," Martin stated as a fact, his back straightening in realization.

When all Chris could do was blink at him, Martin continued. "We were on that plane, trying to rescue you. Diego activated the suit, but I was able to get through to you."

Chris let out a shaky breath, leaning back into the pillows of the raised bed. His head started to pound with a headache. Just like every other time he tried to pull from his memory it was like the suit had locked it away and anytime he tried to access it, his brain would reject the prospect so violently a migraine started to form. "I can't, I can't..."

"Woah, Chris!" Martin gently peeled away Chris' hands from rubbing at his eyes. "It's okay! You're safe; it's okay."

The tenderness of his brother brought tears bubbling over the corner of Chris' eyes and the growing pain in his head did little to stop them. "I-I had to, because I thought you were gone."

Chris' growing incoherentness and irregular breathing brought Martin to press the button on the side of the bed that would alert a nurse. "I'm right here, Chris. Look, see?" The older Kratt brought Chris' hand up to the front of his chest where he could feel the steady expanding of his lungs.

"Y-You were gone, a-an' it was all m' fault." Chris began to repeat apologies as his brother's comforting reassurances were drowned out by the ringing in his ear.

Eventually Martin's comforting hands turned into numerous pairs. Chris fought them as best he could when he felt a sharp prick in his arm and everything melted away into cotton.

When Chris stirred again, the room was cloaked in darkness. The only source of light was a dim lamp in the corner of the room. Turning his head slowly, he was able to make out the form of his brother, in the chair next to him and scrolling through his creature pod. The screen cast a haunting light on his face, revealing even deeper bags under his eyes than before.

The motion caused Martin's eyes to flick up and meet Chris' dazed. He sat up straighter and immediately started trying to rub the exhaustion from his eyes. "Oh, hey," Martin's voice was grainy as if he hadn't used it in a while.

"Wh' time is it?" Chris glanced around the room. Didn't these places usually have clocks somewhere?

"God, I dunno'..." Martin stretched and gave a deep yawn. "Late."

It was silent once more, this time Martin being the one to avoid eye contact. He leaned back into the barely cushioned chair enlisting a squeak out of the frame.

Chris took that moment to collect his thoughts. Without the thumping headache his mind felt clearer, and he could finally digest the information Martin had provided earlier. They had come to rescue him... and Martin killed Diego. Chris' immediate thought was failure. The whole point of him killing Diego was to prevent anyone else from getting involved. But a feeling of relief also washed over him; that someone had taken that burden from him. If only that someone wasn't his brother.

Chris was now able to recognize the sorrow in Martin's eyes as self loathing, rather than disgust. His brother was kind, with a bigger heart than anyone Chris had ever met. Of course he wouldn't turn his back on Chris. *Even if it would be better for him.*

It was clear that in their own guilt and misassumptions of each other, a rift had been drawn between them. A small voice that hadn't been present before Diego, told Chris it was better this way. Martin would be safer from a distance.

Martin had already *killed* a man for his sake.

But Chris was so tired, and his resolve was weak. Deep down he was still terrified, and all he wanted was his big brother.

Because *Martin was alive*.

Martin looked up when the bed sheets started rustling and Chris scooted over to the far side of the bed. He pulled open the blanket as a wordless invitation. "That chair looks really uncomfortable."

Martin let out a huff of amusement and crawled into the slightly more comfortable hospital mattress. He tried move slowly, making sure Chris would be able to predict his movements, and ultimately settled down, allowing Chris the option to scoot closer.

The younger Kratt surprised him, and was almost instantly curled into his side. With Chris' head rested on his chest, Martin wrapped his arm around Chris' back in a comforting hold. The scene was strikingly similar to when they were kids and Chris would wake him in tears from a nightmare.

After a moment of just listening to the beating heart of his brother, Chris spoke up, "What were you waiting on?"

"Huh?"

"Were you fighting sleep for fun?" Chris tilted his head up so he could see Martin's face. He was clearly sleep deprived and currently fighting dozing off. "Or were you waiting to tell me something?"

"Are you going to have another panic attack if I talk about it right now?" Martin asked in an amused tone but he meant it with sincerity.

"No, I think they dosed me with Xanax," Chris returned the joking tone. "I don't feel this calm even on a normal day."

Martin managed a small laugh, practically feeling the disconnect with his brother melt away under the familiarity of their banter. His voice turned serious when he spoke again, "It's not your fault, Chris." He was interrupted by a yawn before he continued. "Earlier when you were panicking, you kept sayin' it was your fault, but it's not."

Chris stiffened and for a moment Martin thought he said something wrong. Chris wasn't sure how else to respond but he assumed violent denial wouldn't be digested very well, and Martin looked like he was already half asleep. Not wanting to cause another scene he settled with, "You were going to sit awake in that chair all night just to tell me that?"

"You needed t' know." With his mission accomplished, Martin could not fight the way his eyes kept drifting closed.

Chris laid awake for a while longer, replaying his brother's words in his mind. How could it *not* be his fault? It objectively just wasn't true. He may not have the clearest memory of the things he did for Diego, but he had the scars to prove they happened. People died. Martin could have died. Chris suddenly felt guilty for allowing himself the comfort of his brother's presence but was too scared to shift away now less he wake Martin. He had already driven himself to exhaustion for Chris' sake too.

He stared at his hand resting on the rising chest of his brother, reminding himself he was no longer wearing the power suit like a mantra. His hands would not morph into claws that could rip the flesh below it, and he was determined to keep watch and ensure of it. As irrational as it was, Chris had long since associated his lucidness with control. If he was

aware of his surroundings, it meant everyone was safe; the suit was off. So, he traced the corners of the room and counted the number of shades on the blinds until the sun came up.

Chris' amnesia had been addressed the next day when Martin expressed concern to the hospital staff of a possible concussion. It was an extremely awkward conversation to have with the nurse present when Chris had to clarify that it wasn't just the rescue that he didn't remember.

Martin, bless his heart, had sat there dumbfounded as Chris fumbled over his words trying to explain how his memories of the suit being activated were more consisted of feelings and concepts than actual memories.

Martin hated to admit the relief that swelled in his chest. By the way Chris described it, he was aware of the violent tasks Diego forced him to carry out, but the aftermath of those scenes still haunted Martin. He silently thanked God that his brother wouldn't be plagued by those images, but he also knew how imaginative Chris could be.

After a few questions prompted from the nurse, Chris also sheepishly admitted he had no idea what day it was, or just how long he'd been missing.

"3 months," Martin softly clarified.

Chris just nodded in solemn acceptance.

"I would need to refer you to a psychiatrist for a more accurate analysis, but what you're describing is more closely related to dissociative amnesia than a concussion," The nurse informed at the end of his checkup.

Martin had gratefully accepted the pamphlet she offered of her recommendation.

The rest of the team dropped by to visit at some point, sharing the good news on their progress of rehoming the rescued creatures. They had been overjoyed to see Chris more engaged and actually respondent to the conversation at times.

"I hear you'll be outta here in a couple days, CK." Jimmy resisted the urge to nudge Chris' shoulder.

Chris smiled, still feeling slightly out of place, but appreciated the team's attempts to regain some normalcy around him.

"Just in time too!" Koki pulled up the flight plan map on her tablet. "We're planning out our path right now to release the animals from different continents."

Chris hesitated, not wanting to ruin their good mood with the fact he was the reason the animals needed to be rescued in the first place. *And he really called himself a creature adventurer?*

Chris' life for the next two days while he waited to be discharged pretty much exclusively consisted of physical therapy and a lot of crossword puzzles.

The constant ringing in his ear was becoming more noticeable as Martin would sometimes have to call out multiple times to get his attention. And when jokingly asking him "Are you going deaf or something?" was not amused by Chris' serious reply of "I think so."

Which is how Chris discovered his eardrum had been ruptured.

That had been like a little cherry on the top of every other diagnosis the doctors had tucked away in his file, and unlike his other injuries, it was uncertain if this one would ever go away.

It was enough to frustrate Chris into refusing the staff's escort when it came time for his discharge. An overly joyful, to the point of discomfort, nurse had brought in a wheelchair to transport Chris to the parking lot.

After feeling humiliated and raw from days of invasive questions and medical examinations, Chris simply got up and limped past the nurse and out the door.

Martin had apologized profusely at the nurse who continued to follow them despite Chris' resolve to march out of the building without her help.

"You got a good grade in physical therapy bro, Which is a completely normal and achievable thing to have." Martin couldn't help but hover nearby in case Chris stumbled, but knew better than to force his help upon his brother. When Chris was determined to do something, he would do it. "But so help me if you trip and break your knees or something, our insurance is dropping us."

The walk to the front exit wasn't too far, but it was definitely more strain than Chris had experienced so far and eventually relinquished permission for his brother to assist.

The nurse obnoxiously followed them out the door and waved the whole time Martin helped him into the backseat of the Creattera. Jimmy and Koki readjusted some supplies they had gathered from the town, before finally leaving the hospital that had practically housed them for the last several days.

Aviva was awaiting at the *Tortuga*, with the engine already humming and ready for departure. They loaded up and secured the Creattera in the garage, and took to the skies for the first time with it's crew intact in over three months.

Chris had found a nice secluded spot in the sky-roof to sit while he watched the clouds pass through the windows. Even if he were well enough to be out of medical watch, Martin had made it clear he was still required to take it easy. On

paperwork, Chris was still technically taking a “sabbatical.”

Martin stopped at the top of the stairs as he watched Chris stare blankly out the window. Just as he feared, when Chris was no longer confined to a bed, he would take every chance he could to avoid everyone. He always had a bad habit of trying to deal with things alone. Usually Martin would let it slide until Chris was ready to seek comfort or help, but he couldn't bring himself to ignore this.

Martin made sure to step extra loudly to alert Chris of his presence when he walked over to him.

They sat in silence for a moment, Martin trying to study his expression. “I don't want you to jump back into this too fast...”

“I'm on *sabbatical*,” Chris replied almost mockingly, remembering the lecture he already received about not being allowed to do any strenuous activity.

Martin rolled his eyes. “I meant... this.” He gestured around the *Tortuga's* interior. “If you wanted to take some time and go back home for a little...”

“What? So I can sit in an empty apartment in the middle of New Jersey and do nothing? That sounds really pleasant.” Chris continued staring out the window, his sharp words purposely trying to get Martin to drop the subject. Perhaps it was unnecessarily cruel to the brother who had just spent days helping nurse him back to health, but Chris was already feeling overwhelmed and didn't care for his sympathy. It was one of those moments he just desperately wished everyone would move on and forget anything had happened.

“Alright...” Martin paused chewing over his words. He was very familiar with his brother's tendency to lash out when wanting space. It always seemed like a gamble to decide whether to respect that space or force him to accept some help. Considering he had been under surveillance for the last few days Martin gave him some leeway. “Just let me know if you need anything, okay?”

Chris hummed in acknowledgement, watching from the corner of his eyes as Martin went back downstairs.

He found it ironic that there was a point he would give anything to see the team again, yet at the moment he couldn't bare the thought of being around them. *Ungrateful*.

He decided to just blame his introverted tendencies for now instead of acknowledging any other recent developments that could have a role to play. He was tired but Chris would be damned if he lowered his guard now that he was in a secluded ship with the people he loved most. If staying alert meant they stayed safe, he would happily watch the clouds until they reached their first destination.

Notes:

This chapter was literally just miscommunication LOL

Chris is back in the turtle ship where he belongs! Surely this will end completely fine and he has no lasting issues! (this is sarcasm there's 2 more chapters guys buckle up)

Also I'm realizing I use drugs as a plot device whenever I'm done with a scene and don't know how to move on from it. I'm like, ok next *stabs someone with a sedative*

I DON'T MEAN TO its just.. so convenient. anesthesiologists, I love you.

Also I know... this is very inaccurate in the crime-aspect of this? like police would 100% be interviewing Chris and Martin probably wouldn't be off scott-free for shoving someone out of a plane even if they were a bad guy. BUT, I don't want to write about the Kratt brothers fighting in court, I think that would be really boring. So ignore that and let me write fanfiction about found family healing in peace okay?

Chapter 9 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/137710678>)

Notes:

Chapter 9!!! I'm not in love with this chapter uhhh.... It's here though!

I honestly was going to postpone this one till next week because things are just getting crazy in my life and I've been posting for like 9 weeks straight, but I said fuck it lets go.

so if its a little bit shitty or badly paced that's why lol

BRIEF TRIGGER WARNING:

there is vomit in this chapter, it is not detailed or described but it does happen!

EDIT: 3/12/24 JESUS CHRIST THERE WERE SO MANY TYPOS I THINK I FIXED THEM ALL. I'm so sorry I was so sleep deprived (much like Chris in this entire fic in general) when I posted this.

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_9_endnotes\)](#).)

Being on sabbatical was probably *the* most boring experience of Chris' life.

Despite being banned from any physical activity, Chris was pretty much incapable of being unproductive without losing his mind. As such, Martin let it slide when he started reorganizing pretty much every nook and cranny in the *Tortuga*. The garage had already been cleaned, restocked, and reorganized at least four times in the past week. He attempted to take a crack at Aviva's workspace, but that desk was beyond help. The murderous looks Aviva threw his way anytime he walked near her precious prototypes was also a great repellent.

He found keeping his hands busy was a great way to occupy his mind away from drowning in the alternative. Of course, the others weren't as keen on ignoring the obvious.

Martin was a nightmare to be around; always watching with those guilt-filled eyes. Chris would find him staring with a heartbroken expression when he thought no one was looking, and then pull out the fakest smile when Chris turned around. It never failed to fill Chris with this sense of self loathing. Martin was also constantly hovering, as if Chris would collapse the second he wasn't around to catch him. But what frustrated Chris the most was the way all of his words were calculated. How he would pause to make sure everything he said was clear and free of dangers. As if he even mentioned something related to Diego, Chris would shatter like a piece of glass. It pissed Chris off more than anything.

Koki and Aviva weren't much better. They were more successful at hiding their pity but Chris could still see it. They weren't as rough with their teasing, and Koki stopped grabbing him by the shoulders when she laughed. Aviva had taken all of her CPS gear to the private workdesk in her room and practically locked Martin's suit out of sight. She would offer for Chris to speak about some of the books he's been reading, but he knew they've never had similar taste in genres.

It was like they had all taken 10 steps away from him yet at the same time breathed down his neck. It was somehow simultaneously suffocating and lonely.

But, God bless Jimmy... for being the only shred of normalcy in Chris' current existence.

When Martin was getting too naggy about Chris resting, or when Koki offered to teach him how to crochet for the umpteenth time, Chris retreated to the one place he knew no one would pester him.

He'd never spent a whole lot of time in the cockpit before, usually too busy running around outside the *Tortuga* or helping in the main console of the ship. But being able to sit in a fairly small and secluded room was comforting in a way he wasn't expecting.

The numerous windows made the cramped space less enclosed, and it was small enough that he could see every corner of it at all times. There were no surprises here. Only one door, and one occupant.

Jimmy never commented on his company, usually just a greeting and a quip about their current coordinates. He never forced a conversation out of Chris, but always responded when Chris was in a talking mood.

They would talk about nothing in particular, but Chris enjoyed when he could get Jimmy on a tangent about his family and the hilarious but ridiculous stories about his grandmother and cousins. Sometimes if Chris was feeling brave he would ask about what happened while he was...away. Jimmy never hesitated in telling Chris anything he wanted to know. So Chris would sit and listen to Jimmy recall the countless hours the team spent tracking down false leads and scouring the globe. When Varmitech was mentioned, Chris couldn't hide the way his body seized in alarm. He couldn't decide whether to be relieved or not by the knowledge he was alive. On one hand, it was one less life he was responsible for; on the other hand, the person who made the reprogrammed suit *possible* was still out there. The only thing that kept Chris from panic, was that Zach had always been a coward, and would probably steer clear of their path for the time being. While that conversation had been one of the more difficult ones, Chris appreciated not being treated like he didn't know what was best for himself.

Other times they would sit in silence for hours, listening to the gentle hum of the ship's engines and the occasional beep of machinery on the control console. It was almost enough to lul Chris to sleep a few times. He usually caught himself drifting off and would go find something productive to do.

Though his sleeping issues were also on the verge of being addressed...

The amount of (forced) rest he recieved while in hospital was enough to keep Chris from facing the issue for a few days, but after a while he found himself crashing on numerous occasions. When Martin had noticed him fighting sleep throughout the day, he had enforced a strict curfew so Chris could get enough sleep.

Little did he know, Chris usually just layed awake waiting for Martin to doze off in their shared room before pulling out a book or sneaking into the storage closet for some more reorganizing. It wasn't that he felt a need to purposely rebel

against Martin's orders, though it had been an added bonus for all the bossing around he seemed to be doing lately, but rather he wasn't willing to relinquish the small amount of control he had. While it was exhausting, he couldn't deny the sense of peace and accomplishment that would fill his chest anytime he managed to witness the sunrise without letting himself doze off. He knew this process was extremely unsustainable, but amidst his sleep deprivation, he just convinced himself he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

Unfortunately by the time he got to the bridge it was already on fire.

It was impossible *not* to notice his intense exhaustion at this point, and in attempts to help, Martin had dissolved some sleeping pills in his afternoon tea.

Chris was so delusional with sleep deprivation by the time curfew rolled around, he didn't fight his brother's urges to go to sleep in the slightest.

Martin had released a heavy sigh of relief at the sight of his little brother snoring softly in his bed, not even bothered to untuck the blankets but rather pass out right on top of them. The older Kratt had pulled one of the extra quilts out of their closet and draped it over Chris, gently tucking him in. He finally crawled into his own bed, across the small room, and closed his eyes with the comfort of knowing his brother was finally resting peacefully.

The peace was violently shattered when screams of terror had pulled Martin from his own sleep, scrambling out of his sheets.

He had slipped onto the floor, entangled in his own blanket before jumping to his feet once more, whipping his head around to locate the danger.

His panic morphed to concern when he found the room empty besides the thrashing form of his brother entrapped in his own dreams. He was quick to Chris' side attempting to shake him awake but finding it hard to dodge the flailing hands that clawed with sheer desperation to escape some invisible threat.

"Chris!" Martin was finally able to catch his hands to stop the thrashing and Chris' eyes flew open wide in terror with another gut wrenching scream.

He immediately recoiled back, banging his head against the wall and trying to gain as much space away from Martin as possible. Chris' chest heaved and his eyes were wild and unseeing, still trapped in the visions of his dream. He reached out to claw away the figure in front of him, Martin holding his arms up to prevent getting slapped in the face.

"Chris, It's me," Martin softly called, finally grabbing one of Chris' hands and tried to hold it still. "You're safe, it's okay."

Through Chris' hyperventilating breaths his eyes finally gained recognition and immediately began to swell with tears. A deep sob erupted from his chest before Martin pulled him snug against him in an embrace. Chris weakly fought against the hold for a moment before sinking into it.

"It was just a dream, you're okay." Martin began to whisper reassurances while simultaneously rubbing Chris' back as it shook with his sobbing breaths. "You're safe, I promise."

Light from the hallway poured into the room as the door was opened, the frightful faces of the rest of the crew peaked in, awakened by the concerning noises.

"It's okay, everything's fine," Martin said a little louder, partially to Chris and partially to the rest of his team. Chris still buried in his shirt was oblivious to the audience he had gained. Knowing he would be extremely embarrassed to find out about it, Martin pleaded with his eyes, hoping the others would understand. "Just a dream."

Aviva hesitated before nodding and wordlessly closing the door once more, though Martin was sure they continued to lurk in the hallway somewhere. He didn't blame them... those screams of pure terror were still ringing in his ears as well.

When Chris' shaking sobs quieted into sniffles and his trembling turned into a shake, Martin could tell he was gaining some coherency. "Do you wanna talk about it?"

Chris shook his head, not even rising it from where his face was hidden in Martin's chest. "Wasn't a dream..." He muttered, barely intelligible.

"Yes it was," Martin argued gently. "You're still in the *Tortuga*, Chris."

Chris couldn't muster the energy to deny further. He wasn't sure how he knew... but he was certain what he witnessed was no dream, but rather a memory. The suit finally decided to share a little... and God was it mortifying.

If he closed his eyes, Chris could still feel the thick red liquid caked between his claws and the tension of flesh as it broke way against his hands. Hands were clawing at his face, beating against his head, desperate for escape. The face of his victim had been hazy, but those piercing eyes of fear had burned their image into the back of his mind.

His stomach twisted and he suddenly felt sick.

Twisting out of Martin's hold, enlisting a yelp of surprise from the Kratt adorned in blue, Chris scrambled into their shared bathroom and collapsed in front of the toilet where he promptly emptied the contents of his stomach.

Chris' shoulders trembled as he gripped the sides of the porcelain, heaving through tears that gathered in his eyes from the clenching of his organs.

“Oh bud...” Martin gave a sympathetic whisper from behind and began rubbing deep circles on his brother’s back. Martin didn’t use the sleeping pills again after that incident.

Slowly Chris’ strength was returning to him. There were still frustrating moments where he felt weakness throughout his body and was forced to drop whatever he was doing to rest, but they weren’t as frequent as they once had been. While he still avoided reflective surfaces like the plague, Chris could at least admit he didn’t look so much like a living corpse anymore. His bangs still had thick streaks of white hair, but at least his skin had more color to it. He peeled away the bandage on his temple for the final time, revealing the freshly healed raised skin. Just another mark that would probably never go away. Another reminder of what he’s done.

Having already re-homed the misplaced animals from Diego’s plane, the crew was back to their regularly scheduled creature adventuring. Martin was currently somewhere in the ocean bellow them, studying the reef’s health under the watchful eye of the *Tortuga*’s team.

Chris desperately watched when Martin would dial in to update them on his findings, feeling a little out of place in their current dynamic. Martin shouldn’t be out there alone, even if they were in a relatively safe area. In attempts to make himself useful, Chris was helping document the research so Koki could focus on the weather radar. Still he felt useless doing a task that Koki would usually multitask with all the time. His strengths lied in field work. And then a bitter fear began to creep into his chest.

What if they don’t need him anymore?

The rest of the crew has clearly survived without him for several months, in fact thrived, if you consider the dent they managed to put in the globes entire poaching empire. His only contribution to the team was his knowledge as a biologist and willingness to test out the power suit. *Which doesn’t exist anymore*, Chris bitterly thought.

To Chris’ understanding, the team was only dragging him along with the intent of him rejoining Martin on the field when he got better. But with each passing day of little progress, he began to fear that maybe he wasn’t *going* to get better. His muscles still had weird spasms and crippling migraines where practically a daily occurrence. Not to mention the fact that he couldn’t hear from his left side.

If he couldn’t rejoin the field, he would have no real place here. Even if nobody would admit it to his face, he would just be dead weight that they would take along in pity.

“Aviva! You gotta make a clownfish power disk for the creature power suit!” Martin’s excited face on the giant screen showed off a small school of tropical fish. “They’re completely immune to the poisonous sea anemones because of this thick layer of mucus. Isn’t that so cool!”

Power suits had been one of those touchy topics that everyone seemed to be avoiding in front of Chris these days. Chris was almost surprised to hear it so blatantly right in front of him and duly noted how everyone’s eyes had flickered in his direction as if watching for some reaction. At this point Chris didn’t even care about any underlying issues he had with the suits, he was just desperate to end this eggshell behavior everyone had adopted.

So while some part of him wanted to recoil at even the thought of suits, instead he responded, “Clownfish are a great example of symbiotic relationships between predator and prey creatures, and maybe if we learn more about the mucus immunity, it could help medical researchers as well.” He just hoped the small smile he adorned looked genuine.

When everyone’s shoulders relaxed and they gave Martin the greenlight to study some clownfish behavior, Chris let out a relieving sigh. He didn’t want to recognize the fear that briefly fluttered through his chest at the thought of a power suit activating. If he was ever going to get back to normal he couldn’t be afraid.

He thought back to the time early in their creature adventuring days when he had given himself a concussion from falling out of a tree, and consequently given himself a fear of heights. This was practically the same thing, right? He just needed to march forward and eventually he would get over it.

The rest of the creature adventure went smoothly... though Chris wouldn’t be able to recall many details considering he was forcing himself to focus so intensely on the keyboard in front of him as he took notes instead of watching the blue suit boot up and shift into a miniature fish Martin.

The second he heard the familiar whirring and beeping of the technology it was like every hair stood on edge. He counted the number of fingers he had and shakily flexed his hands reminding himself that he was in control. He could make his hands do anything he wanted, and nobody else could ever take that from him again. So what if he decided to dig his fingernails into the palms of his hands until they bled? He wanted to. And because the reprogrammed suit was destroyed, nobody could stop him.

He appreciated being left to his own devices through the adventure, not being forced to partake in any conversation. Though it was also very likely that they had attempted to include him and he simply didn’t hear them.

And when the brief adventure had come to a conclusion and Martin was back in the *Tortuga*, wringing out his wetsuit Chris let out a breath he wasn't aware he was holding.

See? He could do this. He coped perfectly fine. Though the funny face Martin shot him when he was drying off said otherwise. If Chris had been paying enough attention he would know that Martin called off the study when Chris stopped responding to anyone.

Martin would be lying if he said he wasn't a little disheartened. He had been hoping Chris would be able to handle at least sit-in on a creature adventure. Chris loved this life more than anything, and the possibility that it had been tainted for him scared Martin a little.

If Chris ever decided to leave this lifestyle behind, Martin would never hold it against him. But he couldn't imagine a life on the *Tortuga* without his brother. They had been on this journey side-by-side for their entire lives. There may have been a bit of codependency formed at this point.

Martin truly relied on his brother, and Chris on him.

But right now Martin felt more in the dark than ever. Chris refused to discuss his time with Diego. Sometimes he would mention something in passing, like how he would briefly see figures of people who weren't really there in the corner of his eyes, but he would always clam up afterwards, denying an elaboration.

He kept trying to jump back into normal routine, but nothing about Chris was *normal* right now. The only predictable thing about his brother at the moment was how he was constantly ignoring Martin's requests to take it slow and would jump right into tasks he wasn't prepared for.

Which is why after a little convincing, a rather brutal argument, and a small intervention by the rest of the crew, Chris agreed to sign up for the counseling his doctor had suggested.

Having a professional involved that Chris could talk to at least gave Martin a little peace of mind that he was opening up to *someone*, even if he suspected he wasn't telling his online counselor the full truth. It was at least a start.

But it still seemed the only times Chris would allow himself to be comforted were the few times he fell asleep and would abruptly awake in the midst of a nightmare.

And despite the haunting screams that would shake Martin to his core, Chris would rarely ever admit to what they involved other than a few incoherent sentences that were often horrifying on their own.

Martin didn't try to pressure him into sleeping as often, but would silently rejoice whenever he found his brother passed out in some miscellaneous area of the *Tortuga*. And for reasons unbeknownst to anyone, he seemed more peaceful when other people were working in the same vicinity; almost as if he needed someone to keep watch.

When Chris finally stayed responsive through an entire creature adventure, Martin almost cried upon his return to the *Tortuga*.

Chris had scoffed at him in an embarrassed annoyance, not wanted to acknowledge his pitifully slow progress, but Martin couldn't hold back his excited ramblings about how proud he was.

Aviva was overjoyed to point out how Chris had even helped her develop some features for the new power disk. The entire crew was practically celebrating the glimpse of a Chris they once knew.

And well, Chris couldn't resist the small smile of relief that crawled onto his own face as well.

Maybe he was getting better... But as his counselor would annoyingly remind him, healing is not a linear path. Which had come as a bombshell reminder when Chris was finally cleared for his first official day back on Team Tortuga.

They had been planning it for days, a simple observational mission on the wooded forests of their favorite place to visit, Alaska. They would be taking a light hike and checking up on the general health of the salmon population, no power suits allowed. It was more or less just an excuse for Chris to get out of the Tortuga and stretch his legs a little, and an opportunity to gauge how ready he was to return from sabbatical.

To Chris' annoyance, the entire team had been meticulously planning their adventure out as if it were a top secret military operation. Martin had mapped their hike and timed their schedule down to the very minute. It was odd, seeing the more spontaneous of the two plan a creature adventure so intensely. In their years of adventuring they had found plans were often pointless when it came to the laws of nature. But Chris was too eager at the chance to prove his recovery that he didn't fight it.

While the overprotective behavior was getting less invasive and restrictive, Martin was still practically breathing down his neck, and Chris would do just about anything to get it to stop. He was slowly... but finally coming to the acceptance of what had happened to him. Chris didn't think he would ever be able to fully shake it, but he could at least acknowledge that he can't go back and change things, so the only other option was to move forward.

Accepting that he wasn't at fault for what happened when the suit was activated, was an entirely different story. He may or may not have been excluding that information from his counseling sessions, but it wasn't really *hurting* anything.

The memories of faces and scenes he had blocked out were returning to him when he closed his eyes, and he kept record of everything he could remember. A notebook hidden away in his bedside table held every detail of the people Chris was certain he was responsible for the death of. The color of their eyes, the clothing they had been wearing, anything they may have said to him, or been doing; it probably wasn't the best coping mechanism out there, but it was *his* way of dealing with it.

The guilt still weighed him down like chains shackled to his feet, but he was getting better at handling it, or at least better at not showing it.

That is, until he found out about Martin's scars.

The scars *he* had inflicted upon Martin.

Martin had been mindlessly rambling about their trip as they both changed into their daily attire in their shared room. "You ready Chris? It's your first day back creature adventuring!"

Chris mutely nodded as he grabbed his jacket. He had feigned sleep the night before, not wanting to risk another nightmare to possibly have Martin delay their outing.

"Man, I'm so excited!" Martin continued as he pulled off the T-shirt he had slept in. "Alaska is so beautiful this time of year. We don't have to do the full hike if you're not up for it, but I think we should check out the river bed first."

The older brother continued on his jittery excitement but the words fell on deaf ears as Chris caught sight of two long sets of clawed scars running down Martin's torso. He froze, not recognizing the origin of the marks on his brother.

He would have remembered a wound so gruesome. No, those had certainly not been there before...

Chris averted his eyes, unable to stomach the sight anymore, because suddenly he could *feel* his claws digging into the flesh.

*He did that.... Oh God, **he** did that...*

Chris knew he had an encounter with Martin back in South America, he initially believed he killed him for Christ's sake. But When Martin had been alive and well, hugging him in that hospital room, Chris just assumed his "death" was another cruel manipulation tactic by the hands of Diego.

But seeing those marks, barely fully healed, it was like the memory of their fight began to seep into his mind like a haphazardly boarded window in a hurricane. And just like that, Martin had shrugged his white shirt on as if he wasn't hiding the once gruesome wound underneath it. As if he didn't almost get gutted by his own brother.

"Chris?" Martin called, his tone clued Chris that it was not the first time.

"Huh? What?" Chris silently cursed as his voice hiccuped.

"You okay?" Martin was looking at him with those uneasy eyes like when he was trying to dissect what his brother was thinking but not wanting to overstep his boundaries by asking. Chris duly noted they didn't hold an ounce of fear.

He was mauled by his own brother and didn't even have the decency to hate him.

"Yeah! Im fine." Chris quickly turned and threw his jacket over his head. "Sorry, my ear was ringing again."

Martin was quiet for a moment, and then his voice got soft in the same tone he would talk to Chris after he had a nightmare. "Maybe we should wait a couple more days..."

"I said, I'm fine, Martin," Chris snapped, suddenly pissed that Martin had been willing to let this slide. Chris had been extremely hesitant to go into details about what he remembered from his time in the suit, fearful that once the team knew the true extent of it, they would fear him.

Like they should, that sneaky voice returned.

But it turns out they had seen the ugliness of it first hand all along, experienced the monster he had become, and still felt safe with him around?

"It's only been a few weeks," Martin sympathetically reminded him, "You know no one would judge you for needing more time."

And maybe Chris was more upset at the fact that they could move on and he still couldn't; That they could trust him, and he couldn't even trust himself to close his eyes. And maybe he was more upset with himself because he hurt the one person who had loved and defending him despite everything Chris had done.

And maybe he was angry because he *wanted* them to distrust him. He *wanted* them to be appalled and disgusted and fearful. He just wanted some other recognition besides his own inner voice that he wasn't overreacting; that what happened, was just as bad as Chris felt it was. He needed to know they understood the reality of it.

This suppressed rage of it all began boiling under the surface, and the only outlet he had was standing right behind him.

"If you don't *trust* me on the field, you could just say that," Chris hissed as he turned to face Martin with a scowl.

"Chris!" Martin recoiled at the sudden change of tone. "That's not what I-"

"Just go, Martin." Chris violently shoved past his brother for the door, not even giving him a chance of rebuttal. Guilt overcame him a second later but he immediately pushed it down. He was overwhelmed with this need to escape; to find

solitude. Because if he lingered near Martin any longer, he was certain his hands would morph into claws and finish whatever he started.

So he turn and left before Martin could see the tears of frustration and guilt gathering in his eyes.

Notes:

Remember how I said this was probably going to be about 10 chapters? yeah, that was a lie. It's looking more like 11 or 12 right now... which I guess could either be a good or bad thing depending on how you wanna look at it. Good because you get more content, bad because you'll have to wait longer for it to conclude.

Anyways, I always appreciate your comments and kudos, thanks everyone for reading so far <3

Chapter 10 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/138120811>)

Notes:

Here it is, Chapter 10!

I'm actually getting a little emotional here. My precious baby (the fanfiction) is almost done... One more chapter to go... They grow up so fast.

As always, your comments and kudos are so very much appreciated! <3

(for the best experience I recommend listening to "So my Darling- acoustic version" by Rachel Chinouriri on loop while reading /J)

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_10_endnotes\)](#).)

As Chris marched down the metal corridor of the Tortuga, suddenly he realized how constricting its walls were. He needed **out**. Feeling like his lungs were closing in from lack of air, he practically sprinted to the nearest door, ignoring Aviva's questioning shout as he passed. By now his tears were flowing freely down his cheeks and Chris couldn't really bring himself to care.

When his feet touched the slightly damp morning grass, his heart almost dropped in relief. That didn't stop him from continuing to blindly run into the thick woods surrounding the Tortuga. When he felt the exhaustion that he's become so familiar with, flow through his muscles, Chris took to the closest tree and went up. He didn't stop until he could almost see the entire forest from the vantage point.

And finally he could breathe again.

Resting his forehead against the trunk as he gasped in air, Chris took a moment to listen to his surroundings. There was a beautiful harmony of morning birds greeting the new day, and a gentle breeze rustled the leaves together in a choir. He softly closed his eyes, experiencing a wave of peace that he couldn't confidently say he's had in months.

He didn't realize just how on-edge he's been until he physically felt his shoulders untense, popping a little as they did so. He's been suffocating in that ship for weeks, unable to relax for the sake of everyone's safety. Constantly masking his reactions for the sake of normalcy, Constantly avoiding everyone's sympathy while simultaneously craving the validation. Constantly bending himself like a pretzel to fit inside the standard of progress to prevent his brother's concern, while still carefully curating the narrative to his counselor.

A shrill cry had Chris almost losing his balance and falling from his perch. Whipping his head around, it wasn't long before he spotted the source of the distress cry.

A baby avian, barely with its first feathers, chirped again as it quickly lost its balance in a nest that appeared to have been ransacked.

Without thinking, Chris shot up on his branch, holding out his palms to catch the chick while almost losing his footing. With the withering pink chick safely in his hands, he scrambled back closer to the trunk for better purchase on the tree, his heart beating rapidly from the instinctual reaction.

Getting a better look at the chick, Chris recognized it as a spawn of a bird of prey. It was far too big to come from a song bird's egg, and it's beak was already curving to a sharp point.

"Hey, little guy..." He gently whispered as he handled the chick as if it were the most fragile being on the planet. "You're okay, I got you..."

He checked it over for any injuries, but the only conclusion he could come to was the chick just seemed a little hungry. He looked up to the nest in the branch directly above him. There had definitely been a predator, likely an owl or other bird of prey, and it seemed like the other chicks weren't as lucky.

"You're just waiting for mom to come back?" he whispered again, the chick still softly chirping in his hands, though it wasn't as distressed as the cries from before. "That's okay, I can wait with you."

"It's not like I've got anything else to do. If I go back now I'm pretty sure Martin is going to lock me up for running off without my creaturepod," Chris couldn't help the smile that tugged on his lips. At the chick's tilt of a head Chris added, "He's great I promise, just... worries too much."

"He'd probably have a great name for you too." Chris laughed when the bird chirped as if he were contributing to the conversation. "But you know what, he's not here so I think I'll do the honors."

Which is how Chris ended up spending most of the day sitting in a tree with the chick he had dubbed, Nemo. He found the task of keeping watch for an adult hawk of some kind was a great way to occupy his mind. Having a great view of the beautiful Alaskan scenery was an added benefit.

The sun had made its way across the sky and was just a few hours away from setting when Chris finally made out an airborne figure in the distance. Preparing to set the chick back in the nest, he halted when the avian approached closer. It was far too big to be any natural bird from these regions.

A flash of blue feathers had Chris settling back down onto the branch, Nemo now chirping from being stirred out of its slumber. "Sorry Nemo, that's not your mom. It's just my brother... *though he might as well be a mom.*"

Certain that Martin had already spotted him with the enhanced vision of the peregrine falcon suit, he didn't make any attempts to wave or call out to him. Instead he focused his eyes on the chick settling back down into his hands.

Martin swooped up and perched on the other end of the branch, flapping his wings a few time to regain balance. The only sound between the two was the whirring of a suit deactivating and Martin settling himself onto the branch, leaving a healthy space between them. "I figured you'd be somewhere up high."

After a moment Chris spoke up, still avoiding eye contact. He recognized that running off may have been a little unnecessary, but he was mostly starting to feel the guilt from snapping at his brother earlier in the day. "I hope you weren't looking for too long," He said in an apologetic tone.

Martin shook his head with a deep exhale. "Only about an hour. Aviva wouldn't let me sooner; said you needed space."

Chris couldn't deny he did feel a lot calmer.

Martin bit his tongue, wanting to spill his guts about how worried he'd been all day and if Chris was going to run off, he should at least take his creaturepod. He figured coming in blazing with his anxious ramblings would do little besides reignite the fire. So instead, he motioned to the small figure in Chris' hands. "Who's that?"

"Nemo. We're waiting for his mom."

"Nemo?"

"Yeah." Chris motioned up to the branch above him with the half-destroyed nest.

"Oh..." After another few beats of silence, Martin wasn't able to hold it back anymore. He felt like it'd been too long since they actually had a meaningful conversation, and he wasn't going to leave this tree until they did. "Chris, about earlier... I trust you with my life." In a more gentle voice he added, "And I think you know that too."

Chris barely nodded, embarrassed to think back on his self projected words, but agreeing nonetheless. His eyes trailed up, resting on Martin's torso, as if he looked hard enough he would be able to see the scars under his shirt. "Why didn't you tell me about those?"

It took a moment of studying where Chris' eyes were trained before Martin was able to connect the dots of what he was referring to. "I... honestly didn't even think about it." He said truthfully, too occupied with other recent events to even consider the perfectly healed wound. He slowly comes to the realization what the cause of Chris' outburst must've been. And in a way Martin understood. He would struggle to forgive himself if their roles had been swapped. He felt a twinge of guilt; it wasn't that he had been trying to hide it per say, but Martin would admit he would have preferred to keep that burden from Chris for a little longer.

"I could've killed you," Chris whispers, finally meeting Martin's eyes as if challenging him.

"You didn't hurt me," Martin stands his ground.

Chris' brow twitched in anger at that. "You literally have the scars to prove it."

"You didn't even know about them until now."

"Amnesia is not defence against guilt."

"Mind control sure is," Martin nearly snapped. He sighed and his tone softened as he scooted a little closer. "Chris, I was there. What attacked me... wasn't *you.*" He gave Chris another chance to argue but he seemed at a loss of words. So Martin continued, "I know you want to think you had any control because it's easier than admitting Diego *used* you."

Chris couldn't suppress the flinch at his brother's words and averted his eyes again.

"And you're trying to take back control now by accepting the blame because you know Diego will never be able to take accountability for it." Martin wanted to stop when he saw the way Chris' eyes became glossy with unshed tears, but knew his words were too important to go unsaid. Chris needed to hear it. "I know you just want closure, but those aren't your debts to settle, Chris. Diego kidnapped you. He fucking *tortured* you; and don't try to deny it because I've seen the scars. He forced you to hurt people and there was *nothing* you could have done."

To accept that Chris couldn't have done anything would be to accept weakness and vulnerability, and even the thought made his stomach twist in fear. Weakness is what people like Diego take advantage of. He didn't want to be just a victim. Somehow the guilt that came with being an accomplice felt so much safer.

Instead of acknowledging the tears bubbling over his eyes, Chris joked, "You sound like my therapist." But with his sinuses blocked it sounded more pitiful than amusing.

"I'm sure that's what she would sound like if you actually told her any of this," Martin added in a slightly accusing tone. "You don't have to deal with this alone... Please bro... What *Diego* did, it's not your burden to bare."

Martin reached out with a hand, cupping Chris' face to force eye contact and wiped one of the tears off with his thumb. "And I'm so sorry you ever felt like it was."

Chris leaned into the touch, still failing to stop the tears that were flowing from his eyes. He felt raw, as if someone had just broke away the walls he had built around himself. He was scared. Anyone could hurt him like this.

Luckily Martin was right there to prevent that from happening.

A loud avian cry pierced through the sky that was beginning to turn beautiful shades of pinks and orange. Both of the Kratts turned their heads to find a goshawk circling the skies above them.

Nemo awoke again in Chris' lap and began chirping excitedly, throwing his neck back awaiting the promised food his mother would bring. Chris quickly placed the chick back into the more stable half of the nest as the mother swooped back down, a bundle of twigs in her beak, to which she started repairing the damaged nest.

Chris backed away to sit down closer to his brother, not wanting to appear threatening to the hawk, his eyes never leaving the pair of birds.

After a few silent moments of watching the mother goshawk feed her young, Martin whispered with a smile, "And I'll name her, Marline. To stay on theme, of course."

Chris let out a small laugh as he watched Marline continue to rearrange the nest around her young who was still chirping for her attention.

"Well even if it wasn't the animal we were planning today, good creature rescue, Chris." Martin brought his brother into a close side-hug.

Martin's comment was what brought Chris to the realization he had accomplished his first creature adventure since returning to the *Tortuga*. Which in turn made him start crying again, this time in relief and joy.

Their return to the ship was slightly nerve wracking, but besides Aviva's firm hug, they didn't mention his disappearance. Instead, Jimmy pulled out a fresh lasagna from the oven and offered a few rounds of uno after dinner. Feeling a lot lighter than before, Chris relished in their company.

While still not being fully back in action, Martin was willing to accept Chris' need for a change in scenery and was much looser about him tagging along on the less intense creature missions. On one of their supply runs, Chris and Martin found themselves goofing off in a larger supermarket than they would usually stop at. Which is how Chris stumbled upon a weighted dinosaur plushie that was thrown haphazardly on a shelf in an aisle it clearly didn't belong in.

"Someone's mom said no..." Chris pointed out the green triceratops with a chuckle.

Martin picked up the plush, surprised at its weight, and the tiny beads he felt shift around under the fabric. Looking at the label, he concluded it was one of the weighted plushies that could be microwaved to double as a heating pad. He'd seen these before, they were advertised to be beneficial for kids with separation anxiety. He couldn't help but think of how much Chris would have loved one as a child. His brother had always been more anxious of the two, and while he didn't like to address it as often, Martin knew he never grew out of his anxiety. Martin couldn't help but glance over to his brother and then back to the plushie. "We're getting this."

Chris raised a brow at Martin's completely unironic tone. "What?"

"It's even *green*, Chris. It was meant to be!" Martin cradled the plushie like a baby, already walking back down the aisle to continue on their track to meet back with the others. "Welcome the newest addition to our family."

Chris followed behind him with a flabbergasted look, "I'm not 10, Martin! I don't need a stuffed animal!"

The dinosaur was later named Lettuce.

And as much as Chris loathed to admit... Lettuce had been extremely helpful in his journey to fix his broken sleep schedule.

His nightmares were still present, but becoming easier to manage. At Martin's insistence, Chris tried to be more open to his counselor about the origins of them. To Chris' surprise, he found her dissection of them very helpful. He still updated his notebook, but he found himself re-reading the pages less frequently.

He was attempting to implement Martin's words into his thinking, so he wrote "Diego's debts" on the cover in bold sharpie. Even if they could never be payed, Chris figured the least he could do was keep the record.

Other nights, he found himself roaming the turtle ship's halls, finding comfort in the routine he'd accidentally fallen into.

One night in particular he bumped into Aviva while turning a corner in the early hours of the morning. The pair simultaneously made quiet shouts of surprise before recognizing the other in the dark hallway.

"Aviva?" Chris rubbed his tired eyes in surprise to see anyone awake, he became more alert when he noticed the expression on her face was alarmed and filled with... guilt?

"Chris!" Aviva broke out in a wide smile, shifting to hide an object behind her back. Chris was able to make out a familiar green before it was hidden. "So... what brings you here?" She laughed nervously, and that's when Chris knew.

"Is that...?" Chris moved to look behind her and Aviva took a few steps back.

"It's nothing!" She assured, but her eyes darted around for escape like she knew she had been caught.

"Aviva." Chris called in a serious tone that he rarely used on anyone besides his brother.

She froze and hunched her shoulders in an apologetic way. "I'm sorry... I just... I had to make sure it would never happen again."

At that, she slowly brought the green creature power vest from behind her back.

Despite already knowing what it was, Chris couldn't help but take a step back when it was presented. It looked nearly identical to his old one, if not even more sleek. He couldn't decide whether to be upset or overjoyed. He couldn't deny some part of him deeply missed the personal connection the suit allowed him to form with the world around him. Another part of him was terrified at even the thought of putting one on ever again.

Aviva gauged for his reaction before she continued, but decided to explain herself at his stare of confliction. "You don't have to use it! I just... hate leaving projects on a bad note. I figured if you ever... wanted to... it would be ready for you."

Chris stepped closer and hesitantly held out his fingers as if it would burn him. He rubbed it between his fingers, feeling the fabric of the vest before taking it into his hands for a better look.

"And I put in the security update I gave to Martin's," She quickly added, eyes flickering between his face and the vest in his hands with building nervousness to his lack of reaction. "The suit has a built-in emergency deactivation at any attempts of foreign modification, and I put in firewalls against any remote activations."

After a moment of silence she sighed and looked down at the ground between them. "Chris, I'm so sorry-"

"Aviva," Chris caught her eyes once more. "...Thank you."

She shut her gaping mouth in surprise as he pulled her into a tight hug, the first he had initiated with her since his disappearance. After recovering from her shock she gently returned the hug with a relieved smile.

After a moment Chris pulled away and he handed the vest back to Aviva. "I don't think I'm quite ready yet, though."

Recognizing personal limitations and setting boundaries? His therapist would be so proud.

"I still have a few more touch-ups to make anyways." Aviva gave a warm smile as she took back the vest. "It'll be ready whenever you need it."

Life on the *Tortuga* was slowly returning to a state of peacefulness, so of course it was only a matter of time before something inevitably shattered it.

Martin was currently trekking through the jungles of northeast India with the *Tortuga* parked in a clearing a few miles out. Martin desperately wanted to add the Nilgiri Martin to his collection of Martin-themed power disks, and begged Aviva to let him go out and look for one while they were already in India. Chris had rolled his eyes at the whole ordeal and stubbornly refused to take any part in it. While Chris usually jumped at any chance to join an adventure, the migraine he had been sporting for most of the day was also a big factor into that decision.

So when Martin called the hub of the *Tortuga*, Chris was almost inclined to ignore it, not having the current patience to sit through another ramble about martins. Luckily Koki had a better control on her impulses and answered the call after the first ring.

Except it wasn't Martin who was on the line.

The camera was pointed towards the ground, as if whoever was holding it wasn't aware a call had been connected. A muddled boot that definitely didn't belong to Martin was partially in frame and muffled discussion in a foreign language rang through the speakers in the *Tortuga*.

The crew shared a confused look as the video shifted and they were able to glimpse a few figures in the distance who were dressed in heavy camo and hunting gear.

“Poachers,” Aviva’s hiss confirmed.

Fear seized through Chris’ body and suddenly it felt like he wasn’t watching a video feed, but rather himself through the eyes of the reprogrammed suit.

Koki quickly disconnected the call before anyone would realize there had been one in the first place. She practically dove to her keyboard, bringing up the coordinates of Martin’s creaturepod. “If he’s still with the creature-pod, he’s not far.”

An intense ringing in Chris’ ear was crippling as the crew scrambled into action, trying to get flybots out and the *Tortuga*’s engine warmed up. A fear gripped his chest like a vice and he couldn’t bring himself to move from the seat he had been in when the call connected. He felt frozen, because it was happening again.

Oh God, it was happening again.

And Martin was out there.

That realization had ultimately been what broke through his spiral. Martin was out there, and Chris would be damned if anything happened to him. And despite being *terrified*, he wouldn’t let it show.

“Aviva.” Chris called out, standing from the chair. He tried to adopt the leaderly voice that Martin would use during serious situations. “I need the suit.”

Aviva was frozen for a second, studying his expression to make sure he meant it, before nodding and running over to her work desk where it was locked away in one of the drawers.

Koki and Jimmy seemed shocked when the inventor pulled out the green creature power vest along with its matching gloves. They hesitantly looked between Aviva and Chris as the suit was handed off and Chris quickly pulled it over his head.

“Are we sure this is the best idea?” Koki questioned nervously. “Maybe Aviva and I-”

“Sorry koki, still working out the biometrics on our suits,” Aviva explained as she helped Chris into his gloves. “I already had a copy of Chris’ ready from the old one.”

“Jimmy, get the *Tortuga* airborne. I’ll get Martin from the ground and we may need an aerial extraction.” Chris swiped his container of power disks from its shelf and ran towards the ship’s door.

Aviva’s hand grabbing his elbow stopped Chris right before he could step out onto the ramp. “Be careful. We’ll be right behind you.”

Chris gave her as confident of a smile as he could manage before shrugging out of her grip and hopping onto one of the buzz bikes parked in the clearing. The hovering vehicle was able to easily maneuver the thick foliage around him as Chris sped at full speed towards the coordinates Koki had sent.

Chris could imagine his heart was beating faster than the bike’s insect-inspired wings when he flipped the kill switch and practically launched himself off the bike when he was within sprinting distance. Running the rest of the way, Chris only came to a stop behind a rather thick tree when he heard echos of people talking.

Taking a more stealthy approach, Chris snuck closer, using the trees and shrubs to his advantage. When he was finally able to spot a figure of blue amidst the green, Chris peered from behind a trunk to take in the scenery.

Martin was tied, sitting on the ground with a makeshift gag in his mouth. He was still slightly struggling against the bindings but the numerous people surrounding him with automated rifles prevented any real attempt of escape.

Chris noticed a camo off-road vehicle was also nearby with several tents scattered the jungle. Martin must have stumbled across their camp and gotten himself caught before being able to call for help.

Chris took a second to collect himself, the reality of the situation catching up to him. He had just impulsively thrown on a power suit and sped off miles into the jungle, with his only backup left in a turtle ship that hadn’t even arrived yet. His hands shook as he opened his power disk container and flipped through his collection.

Freezing, Chris steeled his hand into a fist. These people were armed, and while they hadn’t harmed Martin yet, that could be subject to change. He had to act now and without fear.

Martin needed him.

Looking around, Chris first glanced around the tree tops. A red panda or something with flight capabilities would be ideal. Frustratingly the treetops were clear of creatures and as were the woods in his immediate vicinity. It was only a logical conclusion that animals were avoiding the camp full of hunters, but annoying nonetheless. A high pitched distress call had Chris’ attention back to the group of poachers. In a metal cage that he missed at first glance, sat a clouded leopard, anxiously swatting at the bars.

Oh the irony.

Chris swore under his breath as he considered his options. He could either step out and attempt to negotiate with the people holding guns and who possibly don’t even speak the same language, or he could activate clouded leopard powers.

At this point he was leaning towards the former.

Even the sight of the big cat had put Chris more on edge than he was expecting. The thought of sliding a disk into his suit and then touching the animal repulsed him to the point of nausea. All the time he had spent reassuring himself he would not morph into a vicious, clawing beast seemed redundant.

Anxiety of the scenario began spiralling out of his control and Chris found himself frozen behind the tree with locked knees and rapid shallow breath. *He couldn't do this.* Fear consumed his mind and Chris found himself on the verge of tears.

He could feel Diego's grip on his shoulders, and his deep chuckle in his ear as he taunted Chris over the situation.

"Don't be shy, Gatito. I know you miss it."

"No!" Chris hissed under his breath, his shaking hands gripping the tree for support. "That is **your** burden to bare, not mine."

He didn't miss it. He never wanted to hurt anyone in the first place.

He had no *control*.

Martin's words rang through his head, as they often had since that day in Alaska, " *...there was nothing you could have done.* "

"But I can do something now," Chris whispered again to no one in particular, he took a couple of deep breaths and glanced around the trunk again at the caged leopard. His hands still shook as he took the power disk and slid it into the paw print with a pop, but his face was laced with determination. He made his way closer to the cage, managing to steal a swipe of the tail as he opened the door and the cat leapt into the jungle.

He hesitated for a moment to take another deep breath. "I am in control." he pressed the activation button.

The flash of green drew the attention of the guards who were caught up in a heated discussion, but Chris didn't wait for their looks of confusion to jump into action. While he kept his claws retracted, he still only briefly touched the hunters as he shoved them down or pushed them away, scared that if his hands lingered too long they would dig into flesh by instinct or muscle memory.

His claws only made an appearance to slash the barrel of the guns as the group of hunters quickly recovered and swung their weapons in his direction.

A few of the rifles fired, but the agility of the leopard suit allowed Chris to athletically flip out of their paths and kick out their legs from beneath them.

When the automated weapons had been dealt with, one of them opted to running at Chris with a dagger. Chris was easily able to grab the man's wrist, twisting it in a way that caused him to drop the knife. He then kicked his attacker's torso, sending him rolling to the ground.

As the others began to recover, Chris slid over to Martin, slashing through the rope with his claws and carefully peeling the rag from his mouth.

"Chris?!" Martin gasped with shock at the sight of the power suit, and again at the quick work he's made with the group of poachers. "Look out!"

One of the hunters had been approaching from Chris' left side with a metal pole; Chris oblivious thanks to his ruptured eardrum. Chris whirled around just as the assailant swung.

Martin tackled his brother out of the way, just as the metal pole made a loud thud into the ground. Both of the brothers quickly regained their footing, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their fists outstretched in a defensive pose.

One of the men shouted a command and two other rose, pulling handguns from their belts. Just as Chris and Martin prepared to make a run for it, a large shadow was cast on the entire camp.

The sudden darkness caused everyone to look up, and Chris nearly cried from relief at the sight of the *Tortuga*. The poachers were clearly confused as they took a few trembling steps back and then began booking it into the surrounding jungle, yelling commands of what Chris could only assume meant retreat.

The harness rope was deployed and the brothers both held on as they were unceremoniously pulled from the ground and reeled into the flying ship.

The landing had both brothers sprawled across the floor, but thankfully in one piece, as the *Tortuga* blazed away further from the danger.

There was a moment of silence, as Koki and Aviva ran over to make sure they were alright, and that's when Chris had time to realize. He was in a clouded leopard suit... enclosed in a room with the people he loved most...

He was essentially living out the beginning of his worst nightmare.

Usually in his dreams, this is where the horror started.

Chris didn't realize he had been scooting away from the others until he was hyperventilating with his back against the wall. His leopard ears were flattened against his head and the synthetic fur of his tail was puffed in alarm.

His cornered animalistic appearance was doubled with a sharp hiss when Martin tried to approach him. Martin had paused and held up his hands to appear non threatening. Chris could see his mouth moving, but couldn't hear the words over the sharp ringing in his ear and the pace of his own breathing.

The lights of the *Tortuga* became overwhelming and Chris screwed his eyes shut, trying to back further into the wall. The pressure of the metal felt like a grater to his skin, and he had the impulse to rip out every hair that would gently brush against his forehead as he cast his face down, curling into himself.

He didn't want to hurt anyone. He never wanted to hurt anyone.

"You didn't hurt me, Chris. I'm okay." Martin's reassuring voice sounded muffled, but Chris could feel the warmth of his hand hovering over his knee. "You didn't hurt anybody, you did so good." When Martin's hand finally made contact, Chris couldn't hold back the violent finch, but ultimately resisted backing further away.

Chris didn't realize he had been digging his claws into his own forearms as he held them tightly over his torso in a protective hug until Martin's hands gently tried to peel them away. He struggled against the pull at first. He figured it was better they dug into his own flesh rather than anyone else's.

"Chris, you need to let go." Martin tugged again, a little more demanding this time. "I need to deactivate you."

Oh right... he could do that now...

He finally loosened his grip, feeling the claws retract into his gloves, and a hand finally accessed the paw print in the center of his chest. Relief washed through his body as Chris could feel the suit powering down and the way his overactive senses dulled slightly.

With the lights no longer blinding against his eyelids, he attempted to peel them open, but a command from Martin had him closing them again.

"Don't look yet."

Chris could hear a few murmurs and some shuffling before his gloves were peeled off and a fabric substance was pressed against each of his forearms. He gave a sharp inhale at the sandpaper-like texture and felt his muscles tense at the unpleasant contact.

"You're doing great, Chris," Koki's gentle voice piped up from somewhere on his right. He was able to recognize her hands as they delicately held his arms and started to wrap something around them.

Chris could feel his eyes start to water as the mix of textures and multiple grips started to overwhelm his senses again. His breath hitched and suddenly a weighted warmth was placed in his lap.

Recognizing the lavender scent and sound of rustling beads as the beloved dinosaur, Lettuce, Chris let out a watery laugh and had snaked his arms around the push as soon as they were released.

Taking the release of his arms at permission to open his eyes again, Chris hesitantly looked up to the worried smiling face of his older brother. He could see Aviva and Koki in the corner of his eyes packing up the first aid kit, and Jimmy hovering close by; he must've been the one to fetch Lettuce and warm him up.

Chris let out an exhausted breath and let himself fall forward until his forehead was rested on Martin's shoulder. He was still shaking ever so slightly, but the strong arms wrapping around his back helped keep them steady.

"You saved my ass back there," Martin gave a laugh and Chris could tell he was holding back tears. "Thanks bro."

Chris was suddenly overcome with emotion and would've started crying if he wasn't so drained.

He seemed to be doing a lot of that lately.

But he figured it was at least warranted this time. The warmth of the pushie in his arms grounding him helped Chris backtrack from the meltdown he was initially on a warpath to, and all he could think about was how much he loved his team; how they had been working tirelessly to help put him back together. He thought of how patient that had been despite his quick temper and avoidance. He thought of Jimmy's stories and how eager they had been to find him. He thought of how they risked their lives multiple times to get him back. He thought of how they had crossed literal oceans and followed him to the edge of the earth.

And despite the fragments they had found him in, they continued to love him.

And maybe he wasn't the same Chris from before Diego. Maybe he had new limitations and obstacles to overcome. Maybe things *weren't* normal. And maybe they wouldn't be for a long time...

But for now it was enough.

"Anytime bro."

Notes:

hey look we finally got to the comfort part of the hurt/comfort... and it only took *checks notes* 40k words :]

Side note: I have officially written the length of a novel in 10 weeks..... I'm so tired.

And NO THIS IS NOT THE END!!!! There is actually going to be one more chapter to kinda wrap up all the loose ends (of book 1) ((wink wink nudge nudge)). I will go ahead and warn you that chapter 11 is going to be postponed because I'm going to be on a trip next week for spring break so the final chapter will be there in 2 weeks! (sorry but also I need a break lol)

Chapter 11 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/53024053/chapters/139095649>)

Notes:

Hello!!! I return with the last chapter of Reprogrammed!

Sorry, it's a little late. As explained on my Tumblr I got really sick... again lol

Still under the weather but on enough medication to get this out! Hopefully, it's actually good and that's not just the niquil talking...

ANYWAYS ENJOY!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes ([#chapter_11_endnotes](#)).)

Chris always knew his sharp tongue would get him in trouble one day.

With Diego lacking a sense of humor and sarcasm being Chris' most instinctual coping response, that seemed to be the case almost every day.

Another jolt of electricity erupting from the vice around his chest had Chris gasping for air as he withered on the floor. A leather shoe made a home of itself on the center of his back and slowly began applying pressure until his gasps turned into short wheezes.

His vision swam but Chris still attempted to make out his hand which clenched and unclenched in uselessness. He couldn't quite remember what he did to end up in this predicament; the reasonings all seemed to blur together at this point.

At the end of the day, it didn't really matter. Diego would find his reason. He always did.

Just when the pressure on his lungs eased enough for a couple of shaky coughs to be choked out, a hand snaked around his throat, pulling him up into a weak excuse for a sitting position.

Chris instinctually struggled as his flow of oxygen was once again limited to short wheezes, but halted when a flick of metal reflected in his peripheral.

The side of a switchblade was pressed threateningly against the side of his cheek, seizing Chris' struggles into a shaky stillness as he attempted to hold his own body up in the uncomfortable position.

Diego's voice was whispered so close to his ear Chris could feel the breath of his threatening words, "Why don't I just cut your tongue out right now and save myself the time you are determined to waste me."

Chris could hear himself wheezing deeper as his throat suddenly felt that it was closing shut. He didn't dare even part his lips for fear that Diego would take it as an invitation. With the strain of the uncomfortable way his body was twisted and the tension in his muscles from their previous abuse, he couldn't stop the tremors that caused his cheek to be nicked by the blade.

After a few moments of letting him sit in fearful anticipation, Diego let out a humorless laugh. "Or maybe I'll just have you choking on someone else's blood. You always seem to enjoy that."

"Chris?"

His stomach dropped as a familiar mop of blonde hair entered the corners of his vision.

Martin?

And then everything was green, and sick laughter kept echoing throughout the room as Chris crawled closer.

Martin's eyes were wide with terror, the icy blue like pinpricks against the white of his sclera. He was crying, begging Chris to back away as he scrambled trapped against the wall.

Chris assumed he was crying too by the way he kept choking, yet it did nothing to stop his claws that kept moving out of his will, leaving bloodied paw prints in their wake.

No, no, no, no, This wasn't how it went... Martin wasn't supposed to be here.

"Chris!" Martin's voice sounded strangely close to his head.

Anyone but Martin.

He felt himself pounce, erasing the distancing between them in a single bound. His hind claws gravitated towards Martin's torso like a magnet, where the barrier between the flesh and the sensitive organs was the weakest.

"CHRIS!"

When they raked, it was like a floodgate opened, and Chris wasn't sure which one of them was the one screaming. **"CHRIS! WAKE UP!"**

Jolting forward, Chris nearly knocked heads with the body hovering over him. His first instinct was to run, but his drowsy muscles did not seem to cooperate, and the most he accomplished was an impression of a beached fish.

"Hey, hey, hey," A calming voice that he immediately recognized hushed him. Martin, already well accustomed to these encounters firmly held his shoulders, easing up as the thrashing lessened. "Just a dream, you're fine. Everything's fine."

Chris took a couple of shaky breaths, not trusting his voice quite yet. He could already feel his eyes adjusting to the darkness of their room, and Martin's bedhead hair jutted out in numerous directions. He couldn't help his eyes traveling to the center of Martin's shirt, where there was a thankful lack of gore. He could see the tension melt away from his older brother's shoulders when he finally gave a hesitant nod.

Martin let out a breath himself, which turned into a yawn he couldn't suppress. Chris felt a twinge of guilt. Despite this becoming a routine of sorts, he wished his own nightly terrors didn't interrupt his brother's sleeping habits.

At the same time, he was selfishly relieved someone was always around afterward. Just the sight of his brother breathing and alive, did more to melt away the residual fear than any self-affirmations ever would.

Martin flopped down on the other side of the mattress, letting out another yawn. "Bad one?"

Chris shrugged. They would all be considered *bad*, some worse than others. The ones with Martin were typically worse. When his own mind was done terrorizing him with memories of mauled strangers, it seemed the only way to spice it up was to throw his own brother into the mix.

Now that the initial terror passed, the memory surrounding the dream began to resurface and his mind seemed to replay the scene on a loop, analyzing every detail without his permission.

He felt himself patting the surrounding mattress, in search of the one thing that always aided in grounding him.

Martin, already on the same page, found Lettuce first, passing him quickly to his younger brother who hugged the weighted dinosaur close to his chest, breathing deeply into the lavender-scented plush.

It had been a couple of months since Chris was back from sabbatical. While he saw improvement in pretty much every aspect of his recovery, the nightmares were relentless in haunting him.

They had been one of the major factors in his diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress.

That session had been quite difficult to sit through. He was too scared to even tell his brother for almost a week. It first felt like a heavy badge he had been given, a burden he would now have to drag along. He knew the symptoms were there; everyone could see it plain as day. Somehow it was easier to handle without the official paperwork. Perhaps it was just the inability to dismiss it anymore.

The only comfort it gave Chris was how at least now there was a *reason* behind his sudden episodes of panic. Martin and the rest of the team were becoming accustomed to his spontaneous flight responses and didn't ask questions when he would zone out for long periods of time.

It was becoming easier for Chris to explain that he was easily startled when approached from his left due to the ruptured eardrum, or how he appreciated a warning before Martin activated his creature powersuit on a mission.

The less easy thing to explain was how sometimes Chris could swear he caught a glimpse of Diego in the shadows of his vision. Or how his chest would randomly tighten as if the reprogrammed suit had attached itself to his skin once more.

And the things he most definitely kept to himself and sometimes his therapist, was how often his thoughts intrusively jumped to dark and gory scenes the moment a sharp object found its way into his hands.

Despite all the hurdles Chris had to navigate, he was filled with gratefulness that his team was learning to navigate them with him.

It wasn't often the Wild Kratts took time away from their research and adventures, but it was difficult to resist the occasion when their most recent encounter with Gourmand had landed them in the Italian city of Venice. The sun was starting to set when the villain had finally thrown in the towel and retreated, and the tourist-friendly nightlife of the town was starting to awaken.

It wasn't very often that their creature adventures would take them to such populated cities, so they decided to take advantage of the occasion and have a night out. Changing into more appropriate clothing, Koki and Aiva both broke out their sundresses and the boys their collared shirts and sandals.

Classy jazz played from open wineries and cafes were bustling with groups in their formal attire, basking in the luxurious view of the architecture and rivers.

None of them were very fond of drinking, but couldn't help themselves from a few wine and cheese samples they were offered by a social shopkeeper.

While the nightlife was relatively calm and civilized, they ended up in one of the noisier corners of an outdoor club where a live jazz band played over a small group of swing dancers varying in experience and talent.

It wasn't long before Koki had pulled a protesting Aviva to the floor, joining the other mediocre tourists. Jimmy had immediately gravitated towards the table holding platters of cicheti, leaving Martin and Chris to lounge on the railing that overlooked one of the many rivers cutting through the city.

They watched with fond smiles as Aviva kept tripping over herself, her face flushed with embarrassment, and Koki just continued to laugh and lead her along in the improvised dance.

Martin barely protested when Koki broke away from the floor just long enough to drag him out, paring him as Aviva's new dance partner.

Chris couldn't hold back his laughter as he watched both Martin and Koki attempt to instruct Aviva on the basic steps.

And with the air still warm from the sun's recent departure, the music uplifting the surroundings, and the joyful laughs of his friends dancing their worries away, Chris couldn't help but just relax, leaning heavily into the chilled stone railing.

He eventually broke away from the edges of the club, feeling bold enough to join in on his team's social endeavors, which is when a broad shoulder nearly plowed him off his feet.

Chris stumbled, almost losing his balance before turning quickly to apologize. The words died in his throat as he barely caught a glimpse of the tan skin as the man passed.

It couldn't be...

The slightly stubbled chin and the slicked-back dark hair were immediately recognizable. Chris nearly choked on his own stomach and was certain he would be throwing up if not for the way his throat clenched in paralyzing fear.

The man was swallowed by the crowd before Chris even had a chance to process it.

The music was being drowned out by an intense ringing and Chris couldn't seem to unglue his feet from where they stood frozen on the floor. His breath hitched and it was like every flight instinct kicked in at the same time and he was overwhelmed with the urge to *run*.

Finally having the strength to at least move his head, Chris already noticed a few uneasy stares in his direction. He gulped, forcing himself to move as calmly as he dared, unsure of his destination.

Finding himself in a single-stall bathroom with a hazy remembrance of how he had gotten there in the first place, Chris locked the door, slowly sliding down against it. He gulped in air at a rapid pace, eyes traveling around the room unable to stay on one thing for too long.

Stop, you're being paranoid.

Chris attempted to reason before he fully spiraled out of control.

Diego is dead.

Chris reminded himself that he never even caught a glimpse of the man's face. While he had never seen Diego without the mask, he was at least familiar with those sharp eyes. He reasoned he would recognize them a mile away, and also the fact Diego had fallen out of a moving plane. Maybe it was the similar build or the red button-down that had triggered such a violent reaction.

Chris couldn't be sure, but eventually gathered himself enough to stand back up, using the sink as a crutch.

He stared long and hard at the reflection in front of him. Taking in the thick streaks of white in his hair, and the raised skin on his left temple. This was just another instance of his mind playing tricks on him. An unfortunate coincidence that triggered a reactive memory...

He was fine.

Diego is dead.

Finding the courage to unlock the door, and allow himself to be swallowed with the music once more was difficult. Chris couldn't help but be in awe of all the people still dancing and enjoying their night, completely oblivious to the danger they had just narrowly avoided. He was almost jealous to see people so relaxed as if his heart wasn't racing with adrenaline.

He suddenly wasn't feeling up to dancing anymore and felt a guilt overtake him as he made his way back to where he had been hanging out by the railing. The others wouldn't ask questions or complain in the slightest if he expressed wanting to leave. But as his eyes found them still dancing, having dragged Jimmy along as well, he couldn't bring himself to interrupt.

He was starting to feel the embarrassment of such an overreaction. He felt he'd been enough of a burden lately. The least he could do was hold out for a couple of hours and let them have their fun. His attempts to pep himself up enough to simply hang out on the outskirts of the club halted entirely when he returned to see a small box on the railing.

His immediate thought was the likes of someone leaving their proposal ring unattended, but inspecting further he noticed a tag tied to the side.

In golden calligraphy, it read, "Christopher"

His stomach dropped, but he was unable to stop himself from shakily lifting the lid of the box. The glimmer of gold reflected heavily from the streetlight that seemed to cast him in a spotlight.

Pulling out the shard of gold, Chris felt the music drift away once more into a silence that was filled with the blood pumping in his ears. It was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, but the texture engraved into the surface had been engraved into the back of his mind.

He desperately wanted to find reasons against what his instincts were screaming at him. Begged for some self-affirmation that this was another cruel trick. But as he turned the shard over in his hands, he realized there was nothing he could say to change the fact there was a piece of Diego's mask sitting in his hand.

That someone had left it in a box with his name on it. That they had been watching long enough to know he would come back for it.

And Chris found himself frozen again, not in panic but some solemn acceptance. It was as if he already knew this would haunt him for the rest of his life, and in some way, there was a relief the wait was finally over.

A loud and familiar laugh, pulled Chris back to the present as Martin jogged up to him; a large goofy smile stretched across his face. "Come on, Chris. I think Aviva finally got the hang of-"

He paused, taking in the way Chris' shoulders were tense, and Chris could only imagine the haunted look he was failing to hide.

Immediately Martin sobered, gently holding onto one of Chris' elbows, and whispered in a serious tone, "You okay?"

And Chris now had a choice to make. He could show Martin the box and then they would all be trapped in this cycle once again. Chasing leads constantly looking over their shoulders for the ghost of someone who was supposedly dead. Chris would have to watch as Martin lost sleep over worrying and put all his needs aside for the sake of everyone else. He would be forcing the team to throw themselves right into the line of fire once again.

But was it really worth it? All over him?

He saw the haunted look when Martin recalled shoving Diego out of the plane. How everyone's voices get quiet the moment his name is mentioned. How Jimmy is suddenly more comfortable handling blood. He thought back to the months of grief and pain they endured all because of him.

Chris wasn't sure if he could do it again. If he could let them go through it all again.

And then he thought of the number of times he's seen the life drain from Martin's eyes in his dreams, and how Diego seemed desperate to make that a reality.

The truth of the matter was that someone had been following them, and had purposely decided to let themselves be known to Chris specifically. This was more than a warning.

Chris had been blissfully unaware a mere minute ago, if Diego wanted to harm him he would have done so by now. This was a threat.

So instead he shoved the shard into his pocket and gave Martin the most genuine smile he was capable of. "Fine, bro."

Martin seemed to study his face for a moment, questioning its validity before giving an accepting nod and a gentle smile returned to his face once more.

Chris allowed himself to be dragged out to the dance floor and it was only a slightly awkward transition trying to get his tense joints to move like everyone else. Somehow all his blind panic melted away into focused precision and he kept his eyes glancing over the crowd for any glimpse of familiarity.

The decision only hardened in his chest as he soaked in the laughter of his closest friends. The fear in his stomach only channeled his determination even more. He would enjoy this moment with the family he had grown to love because tomorrow...

Diego had debts to pay, and Chris would make sure they didn't go unsettled.

Notes:

annnnnnnn THE END!!!

for now...

I'M SO HAPPY AND SAD AT THE SAME TIME THAT THIS IS FINALLY FINISHED. I've never actually finished a fic this long so I'm actually really impressed with myself... Baby's first novel...

I have sooo many ideas for how this storyline could continue but for now it will just have to be left to the imagination! I do have plans on a sequel but no planned release date yet so I guess just hang tight while I take a short break from writing to focus on school <3

Thank you so much to everyone for all the comments and kudos. I'm so happy that you guys enjoy my story and seriously those support comments were pushing me through this thing. I love you guys ouughhh okay bye for now! <333

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